CHAPTER SIX

Voice under Domination: The Arts of Political Disguise

Hitting a straight lick with a crooked stick.
—JAMAICAN SLAVE SAYING

By stretching language, we'll distort it sufficiently to wrap ourselves in it and hide, whereas the masters contract it.
—GENET, The Blacks

Mes enfants, you mustn't go at things head-on, you are too weak; take it from me and take it on an angle... Play dead, play the sleeping dog.
—BALZAC, Les Paysans

Most of the political life of subordinate groups is to be found neither in overt collective defiance of powerholders nor in complete hegemonic compliance, but in the vast territory between these two polar opposites. The map of this territory between the two poles thus far provided risks giving the impression that it consists solely of convincing (but perhaps sham) performances onstage on the one hand and relatively uninhibited hidden discourse offstage. That impression would be a serious mistake. My aim in this chapter is to direct attention to the manifold strategies by which subordinate groups manage to insinuate their resistance, in disguised forms, into the public transcript.

If subordinate groups have typically won a reputation for subtlety—a subtlety their superiors often regard as cunning and deception—this is surely because their vulnerability has rarely permitted them the luxury of direct confrontation. The self-control and indirection required of the powerless thus contrast sharply with the less inhibited directness of the powerful. Compare, for example, the aristocratic tradition of the duel with the training for self-restraint in the face of insults found among blacks and other subordinate groups. Nowhere is the training in self-control more apparent than in the tradition of the "dozens" or "dirty dozens" among young black males in the United States. The dozens consist in two blacks trading rhymed insults of one another's family (especially mothers and sisters); victory is achieved by never losing one's temper and fighting, but rather in devising ever more clever insults so as to win the purely verbal duel. Whereas the aristocrat is trained to move every serious verbal insult to the terrain of mortal combat, the powerless are trained to absorb insults without retaliating physically. As Lawrence Levine observes, "The Dozens served as a mechanism for teaching and sharpening the ability to control emotions and anger; an ability which was often necessary for survival." There is evidence that many subordinate groups have developed similar rituals of insult in which a loss of self-control means defeat.

The training in verbal facility implied by rituals of this kind enables vulnerable groups not only to control their anger but to conduct what amounts to a veiled discourse of dignity and self-assertion within the public transcript. To sketch out fully the patterns of ideological struggle on this ambiguous terrain would require an elaborate theory of voice under domination. While nothing like a full analysis of voice under domination is possible here, we can examine the ways in which ideological resistance is disguised, muted, and veiled for safety's sake.

The undeclared ideological guerrilla war that rages in this political space requires that we enter the world of rumor, gossip, disguises, linguistic tricks, metaphors, euphemisms, folktales, ritual gestures, anonymity. For good reason, nothing is entirely straightforward here; the realities of power for subordinate groups mean that much of their political action requires interpretation precisely because it is intended to be cryptic and opaque. Before the recent development of institutionalized democratic norms, this ambiguous realm of political conflict was—short of rebellion—the site of public political discourse. For much of the world's contemporary subjects, for whom citizenship is at best a utopian aspiration, this remains the case. Thus, in describing the

1. Black Culture and Black Consciousness, 358.
2. See, for example, Donald Brenneis, “Fighting Words,” in Not Work Alone: A Cross-cultural View of Activities Superfluous to Survival, ed. Jeremy Cherfas and Roger Lewin, 168-80, on such patterns, as well as Roger Vailland The Lacs trans. Peter Wiles (New York: Knopf, 1958), which makes the drinking games of la legge/la passatella in Italy into a metaphor for the patience required of the weak.
3. The term voice is adopted from Albert Hirschman's striking contrast between the classic economic response to consumer dissatisfaction with a firm's product—exit—and the classical political response to dissatisfaction with an institution's performance—voice. When exit (defection to an alternative) is unavailable or costly, Hirschman argues, dissatisfaction will likely take the form of open complaints, anger, and demands. For our purpose, however, the form that voice takes will vary according to the capacity of powerholders to severely punish open resistance. Albert O. Hirschman, Exit, Voice, and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations, and States.
distinctive Christian beliefs and practices among the Tswana peoples of South Africa, Jean Comaroff takes it as given that “such defiance had, of necessity, to remain concealed and coded.” As late as the eighteenth century in England, the historian E. P. Thompson notes, repression precluded direct political statements by lower classes; instead, “the expression of people’s political sympathies was more often oblique, symbolic, and too indefinite to incur prosecution.” It remains to specify the techniques by which, against heavy odds, subordinate groups infiltrate the public transcript with dissent and self-assertion.

By recognizing the guises that the powerless must adopt outside the safety of the hidden transcript, we can, I believe, discern a political dialogue with power in the public transcript. If this assertion can be sustained, it is significant insofar as the hidden transcript of many historically important subordinate groups is irrecoverable for all practical purposes. What is often available, however, is what they have been able to introduce in muted or veiled form into the public transcript. What we confront, then, in the public transcript, is a strange kind of ideological debate about justice and dignity in which one party has a severe speech impediment induced by power relations. If we wish to hear this side of the dialogue we shall have to learn its dialect and codes. Above all, recovering this discourse requires a grasp of the arts of political disguise. With that goal in mind I first examine the basic or elementary techniques of disguise: anonymity, euphemisms, and what I call grumbling. I then turn to more complex and culturally elaborate forms of disguise found in oral culture, folktales, symbolic inversion, and, finally, in rituals of reversal such as carnival.

Elementary Forms of Disguise

Like prudent opposition newspaper editors under strict censorship, subordinate groups must find ways of getting their message across, while staying somehow within the law. This requires an experimental spirit and a capacity to test and exploit all the loopholes, ambiguities, silences, and lapses available to them. It means somehow setting a course at the very perimeter of what the authorities are obliged to permit or unable to prevent. It means carving out a tenuous public political life for themselves in a political order that, in principle, forbids such a life unless fully orchestrated from above. Below, we briefly explore some of the major techniques of disguise and concealment and suggest how they may be read.

At the most basic level, such techniques can be divided into those that disguise the message and those that disguise the messenger. The polar contrast here would be between, say, a slave whose tone of voice in saying, “Yes, Massa” seemed slightly sarcastic, on the one hand, to a direct threat of arson delivered anonymously by the same slave to the same master, on the other. In the first case the subordinate who is acting is identifiable, but his action is probably too ambiguous to be actionable by authorities. In the second case, the threat is all too unambiguous, but the subordinate(s) responsible for making it is concealed. Both messenger and message may, of course, be disguised, as when masked peasants deliver a cryptic, but threatening, insult to a nobleman during carnival. If both the messenger and the message in such a case are openly disclosed, then we are in the realm of direct confrontation (and perhaps, rebellion).

The practical modes of concealment are limited only by the imaginative capacity of subordinates. The degree of disguise, however, that elements of the hidden transcript and their bearers must assume to make a successful intrusion into the public transcript will probably increase if the political environment is very threatening and very arbitrary. Here we must above all recognize that the creation of disguises depends on an agile, firm grasp of the codes of meaning being manipulated. It is impossible to overestimate the subtext of this manipulation.

Two contemporary examples from Eastern Europe serve to show how exaggerated compliance and perfectly ordinary behavior, when generalized and coded, can constitute relatively safe forms of resistance. In his (thinly disguised) autobiographical account of his time in a penal battalion for political prisoners, Czech writer Milan Kundera describes a relay race pitting the camp guards, who had organized it, against the prisoners. The prisoners, knowing that they were expected to lose, spoiled the performance by purposely losing while acting an elaborate pantomime of excess effort. By exaggerating their compliance to the point of mockery, they openly showed their contempt for the proceedings while making it difficult for the guards to take action against them. Their small symbolic victory had real political conse-

---

5. Whigs and Hunters, 200.
6. This point has been made forcefully by Susan Friedman in “The Return of the Repressed in Women’s Narrative.” Citing Freud’s analogy between political censorship and repression in the Interpretation of Dreams, in which “the stricter the censorship, the more far-reaching will be the disguise,” she shows convincingly that women’s narrative can be seen “as an insistent record—a trace, a web, a palimpsest, a rune, a disguise—of what has not or cannot be spoken directly because of the external and internalized censors of patriarchal social order.”
quences. As Kundera noted, "The good-natured sabotage of the relay race strengthened our sense of solidarity and led to a flurry of activity."  

The second example, from Poland, was both more massive and planned. In 1983, following General Wojciech Jaruzelski’s declaration of martial law aimed at suppressing the independent trade union Solidarnosc, supporters of the union in the city of Lodz developed a unique form of cautious protest. They decided that in order to demonstrate their disdain for the lies propagated by the official government television news, they would all take a daily promenade timed to coincide exactly with the broadcast, wearing their hats backwards. Soon, much of the town had joined them. Officials of the regime knew, of course, the purpose of this mass promenade, which had become a powerful and heartening symbol for regime opponents. It was not illegal, however, to take a walk at this time of day even if huge numbers did it with an obvious political purpose in mind. By manipulating a realm of ordinary activity that was open to them and coding it with political meaning, the supporters of Solidarity “demonstrated” against the regime in a fashion that was awkward for the regime to suppress.

I now turn to a few of the major forms of disguise.

Anonymity

“One member of the audience, explaining at the end of a carefully typed message why it was unsigned said, ‘This isn’t the first winter this wolf has seen.’”

OPEN DISCUSSION OF CURRENT EVENTS, MOSCOW, NOVEMBER 1987

A subordinate conceals the hidden transcript from powerholders largely because he fears retaliation. If, however, it is possible to declare the hidden transcript while disguising the identity of the persons declaring it, much of the fear is dissipated. Recognizing this, subordinate groups have developed a large arsenal of techniques that serve to shield their identity while facilitating open criticism, threats, and attacks. Prominent techniques that accomplish this purpose include spirit possession, gossip, aggression through magic, rumor, anonymous threats and violence, the anonymous letter, and anonymous mass defiance.

8. Ibid., 86.
9. There was a sequel to this episode when the authorities shifted the hours of the Lodz curfew so that a promenade at that hour became illegal. In response, for some time, many Lodz residents took their televisions to the window at precisely the time the government newscast began and beamed them out at full volume into empty courtyards and streets. A passerby, who in this case would have had to have been an officer of the “security forces,” was greeted by the eerie sight of working-class housing flats with a television at nearly every window blaring the government’s message at him.

Spirit possession and cults of possession are common in a great many preindustrial societies. Where they exist, they frequently offer a ritual site at which otherwise dangerous expressions of hostility can be given comparatively free rein. I. M. Lewis, for example, argues persuasively that spirit possession in many societies represents a quasi-covert form of social protest for women and for marginal, oppressed groups of men for whom any open protest would be exceptionally dangerous. Ultimately, Lewis’s argument makes implicit use of the hydraulic metaphor we first encountered in the words of Mrs. Poyser; the humiliations of domination produce a critique that, if it cannot be ventured openly and at the site at which it arises, will find a veiled, safe outlet. In the case of spirit possession, a woman seized by a spirit can openly make known her grievances against her husband and male relatives, curse them, make demands, and, in general, violate the powerful norms of male dominance. She may, while possessed, cease work, be given gifts, and generally be treated indulgently. Because it is not she who is acting, but rather the spirit that has seized her, she cannot be held personally responsible for her words. The result is a kind of oblique protest that dares not speak its own name but that is often acceded to if only because its claims are seen to emanate from a powerful spirit and not from the woman herself.

Lewis extends his argument to many comparable situations in which any open protest by a subordinate group seems foredoomed. In particular, he examines episodes of possession among the low-caste servants of the higher-caste Nayars in the southern Indian state of Kerala, where he finds the same pattern of grievances and demands finding full voice under the cloak of possession. He makes a direct link between possession and deprivation:

It is no surprise to find that the incidence of actual afflictions laid at the door of these spirits tends to coincide with episodes of tension and unjust treatment in relations between master and servant. Thus, as so often elsewhere, from an objective viewpoint, these spirits can be seen to function as a sort of “conscience of the rich.” Their malevolent power reflecting the feelings of envy and resentment which peoples of high caste assume the less fortunate lower caste must harbour in relation to their superiors.

Beyond spirit possession, strictly defined, Lewis claims that his analysis can often be applied to ecstatic cults, dionysian sects, rituals of drunkenness, hysteria, and the “hysteric” illnesses of Victorian women. What he finds

11. Ibid., 115.
comparable in these cases is a pattern of subordinate group expression of dissatisfaction in which personal responsibility may be disavowed. Whether or not it is plausible to call such acts protest is nearly a metaphysical question. On one hand, it is experienced as involuntary and as possession, never directly challenging the domination at which it is aimed. It does, on the other hand, offer some practical redress, it gives voice to a critique of domination, and, in the case of cults of possession, it frequently creates new social bonds among those subject to such domination.

The great significance of the patterns Lewis finds is surely that they represent elements of a critique of domination that might otherwise have no public forum at all. Given the circumstances Lewis is examining, the choice would seem to be between fugitive forms of resistance such as possession and silence.

Gossip is perhaps the most familiar and elementary form of disguised popular aggression. Though its use is hardly confined to attacks by subordinates on their superiors, it represents a relatively safe social sanction. Gossip, almost by definition, has no identifiable author, but scores of eager retailers who can claim they are just passing on the news. Should the gossip—and here I have in mind malicious gossip—be challenged, everyone can disavow responsibility for having originated it. The Malay term for gossip and rumor, khabar angin (news on the wind), captures the diffuse quality of responsibility that makes such aggression possible.

The character of gossip that distinguishes it from rumor is that gossip consists typically of stories that are designed to ruin the reputation of some identifiable person or persons. If the perpetrators remain anonymous, the victim is clearly specified. There is, arguably, something of a disguised democratic voice about gossip in the sense that it is propagated only to the extent that others find it in their interest to retell the story. If they don’t, it disappears. Above all, most gossip is a discourse about social rules that have been violated. A person’s reputation can be damaged by stories about his tightfistedness, his insulting words, his cheating, or his clothing only if the public among whom such tales circulate have shared standards of generosity, polite speech, honesty, and appropriate dress. Without an accepted normative standard from which degrees of deviation may be estimated, the notion of gossip would make no sense whatever. Gossip, in turn, reinforces these normative standards by invoking them and by teaching anyone who gossips precisely what kinds of conduct are likely to be mocked or despised.

We are more familiar with gossip as a technique of social control among relative equals—the stereotypical village tyranny of the majority—than from below. What is less often recognized, as emphasized in the previous chapter, is that much of the gossip, prying eyes, and invidious comparisons in such settings is precisely what helps maintain a conformity vis-à-vis dominating outsiders. In his analysis of social aggression in Andalusian villages—many with a radical, anarchist past—David Gilmore stresses the way in which they solidify a common front directed at rich landowners and the state. When the victim is not too powerful, the gossiper makes sure that he knows he is being gossiped about; one might give people hard looks or perhaps cup one’s hands to a friend’s ear as the victim passes on the street. The purpose is to punish, chastise, or perhaps even drive out the offender. Gossip must take a more circumspect form against the rich and powerful for fear that the principal gossipers, if known, might well lose their jobs. Bitter criticism via gossip is also used routinely by those at the bottom of the caste system to destroy the reputation of their high-caste superiors. Gossip, even in its strong form of character assassination, is a relatively mild sanction against the powerful. It presupposes not only a face-to-face community, but also one in which a reputation is still of some importance and value.

Gossip might be seen as the linguistic equivalent and forerunner of witchcraft. In traditional societies, gossip is often reinforced by witchcraft: it is the next step, so to speak, in the escalation of social hostilities. The use of magic represents an attempt to move beyond gossip and turn “hard words” into an act of secret aggression that will bring direct harm to one’s enemy, his family, his livestock, his crops. An aggressive wish to bring misfortune on someone (“May his crops wither!”) becomes, through the performative act of magic, the

12. Abu-Lughod, Veiled Sentiments, 102, reports a case in which a woman claims, to the ethnographer, that she purposely feigned possession in order to escape a hated marriage. In this case the tactic was successful.

13. The power to gossip is more democratically distributed than power, property, and income and, certainly, than the freedom to speak openly. I do not mean to imply that gossip cannot and is not used by superiors to control subordinates, only that resources on this particular field of struggle are relatively more favorable to subordinates. Some people’s gossip is weightier than that of others, and, providing we do not confuse status with mere public deference, one would expect that those with high personal status would be the most effective gossipers.

14. Aggression and Community: Paradoxes of Andalusian Culture. See also the classic analysis by J. A. Pitt-Rivers, The People of the Sierra, chap. 11.


16. It would be rare for a powerful person’s standing to have no value whatever, if for no other reason than a climate of opinion that held him in contempt would encourage other forms of resistance.
agency of harm.\textsuperscript{17} Like gossip and unlike an open verbal declaration of war, magical aggression is secret and can always be disavowed. Witchcraft is in many respects the classical resort of vulnerable subordinate groups who have little or no safe, open opportunity to challenge a form of domination that angers them. In a society that practices magic, those who perceive a lively resentment and envy directed at them from below will easily become convinced that any reverses they suffer are the result of malevolent witchcraft.

Rumor is the second cousin of gossip and magical aggression. Although it is not necessarily directed at a particular person, it is a powerful form of anonymous communication that can serve particular interests. Rumor thrives most, an early study emphasized, in situations in which events of vital importance to people's interests are occurring and in which no reliable information—or only ambiguous information—is available. Under such circumstances one would expect people to keep their ears close to the ground and to repeat avidly whatever news there was. Life-threatening events such as war, epidemic, famine, and riot are thus among the most fertile social sites for the generation of rumors. Before the development of modern news media and wherever, today, the media are disbelieved, rumor might be virtually the only source of news about the extralocal world. The oral transmission of rumor allows for a process of elaboration, distortion, and exaggeration that is so diffuse and collective it has no discernible author. The autonomy and volatility of politically charged rumor can easily spark violent acts. As Ranajit Guha notes, "An unmistakable, if indirect, acknowledgement of its power is the historically known concern for its repression and control on the part of those who, in all such societies, had the most to lose by rebellion. The Roman emperors were sensitive enough to rumor to engage an entire cadre of officials—\textit{delatores}—in collecting and reporting it."\textsuperscript{18}

The rapidity with which a rumor is propagated is astonishing. In part this derives from the mere mathematical logic of the chain letter phenomenon. If each hearer of a rumor repeats it twice, then a series of ten tellings will produce more than a thousand bearers of the tale. More astonishing than its speed, however, is the elaboration of rumor. In the great rebellion in India in 1857, touched off by a mutiny in the army, for example, Guha explains how an initial panic over greased cartridges grew quickly into rumors of forcible conversion, of the prohibition of agriculture, of a new law requiring everyone to eat bread.\textsuperscript{19}

For our purposes the key fact is that the process of embellishment and exaggeration is not at all random. As a rumor travels it is altered in a fashion that brings it more closely into line with the hopes, fears, and worldview of those who hear it and retell it. Some ingenious experimental evidence has been developed to show that the transmission of rumor entails a loss of some information and the addition of elements that fit the general gestalt of the messengers.\textsuperscript{20} Thus, U.S. experimenters showed a picture of a threatening crowd scene in which a white man holding a razor confronted an unarmed black man. In more than half of the retellings by whites, the razor was switched to the hand of the black man, in keeping with their fears and assumptions about blacks! The black subjects did not transfer the razor. The rumor, it appears, is not only an opportunity for anonymous, protected communication, but also serves as a vehicle for anxieties and aspirations that may not be openly acknowledged by its propagators. On this basis one must expect rumors to take quite divergent forms depending on what class, strata, region, or occupation they are circulating in.

The most elaborate study of historical rumor—that compiled by Georges Lefebvre in tracing the panic over a monarchist invasion in the summer following the storming of the Bastille—demonstrates in considerable detail the role of wish (and fear) fulfillment in "La Grande Peur."\textsuperscript{21} The Revolution itself, civil strife, hunger, and roaming bands of dispossessed provided just the kind of unprecedented and charged atmosphere in which the extraordinary was commonplace and rumor thrived. Before the Revolution, for that matter, when the king summoned the Estates General for the first time since 1614 and initiated the compiling of complaints, it is not entirely surprising that the utopian hopes and dire fears of the peasantry colored their interpretation of its meaning:

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{18} \textit{Elementary Forms of Peasant Insurgency}, 251.
  \item \textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 255–59. It is implausible to say that the rumors were the proximate cause of the Sepoy Mutiny.
  \item \textsuperscript{20} Gordon W. Allport and Leo Postman, \textit{The Psychology of Rumor}, esp. 75.
  \item \textsuperscript{21} \textit{The Great Fear of 1789: Rural Panic in Revolutionary France}, trans. Joan White. A striking recent parallel to Lefebvre's account can be seen in the grisly rumors that swept Rumania immediately after the fall of the Ceausescus. It was variously reported that sixty thousand had been killed by the Securitate in Timisoara, that the Securitate had poisoned the water supply there, and that thirty thousand die-hard Securitate officers had dug vast bunkers in the Carpathian mountains. See "Whispered No Longer, Hearsay Jolts Bucharest," Celestine Bohlen, \textit{New York Times}, January 4, 1990, p. A14.
\end{itemize}
they were then invited not only to elect their representatives but also to draw up the cahiers de doléances: the king wished to hear the true voice of his people so that he might know their sufferings, their needs and their desires, presumably so that he could redress all wrongs. The novelty of the affair was truly astonishing. The king, the church’s anointed, the lieutenant of God was all-powerful. Goodbye poverty and pain. But as hope sprang in the peoples’ breasts, so did hatred for the nobility.22

It is not a simple matter to determine the proportions of wish fulfillment and willful misunderstanding that went into these utopian readings. What is certain, however, is that like Russian peasants interpreting the czar’s wishes, their interpretations were very much in line with their interests. What are we to make of the following two contemporary reports by officials on the rumors then circulating?

What is really tiresome is that these assemblies that have been summoned have generally believed themselves invested with some sovereign authority and that when they come to an end, the peasants went home with the idea that henceforth they were free from tithes, hunting prohibitions, and the payment of feudal dues.23

The lower classes of the people are convinced that when the Estates General sat to bring about the regeneration of the kingdom we would see a total and absolute change, not only in present procedures, but also in conditions and income. . . . The people have been told [sic] that the king wishes every man to be equal, that he wants neither bishops nor lords; no more rank; no more tithes or seigneural rights. And so these poor misguided people believe they are exercising their rights and obeying their king.24

The second observer appears to assume that the great expectations of the “lower classes” can be traced to outside agitators of some kind. In any event, clearly the lower classes believed what they chose to believe: they were, after all, free to disregard any utopian rumors. The rumors in this case, of course, had enormous consequences that impelled the revolution forward. Peasants, in fact, largely ceased paying feudal dues, withheld tithes, sent their cows and sheep to graze on the seigneurs’ land, hunted and took wood as they pleased before these matters were resolved by the revolutionary legislature. When they

22. Ibid., 38.
23. Ibid., 39, quoting Desiré de Debuisson, lieutenant of the Saumur baillage during the elections.
24. Ibid., 39-40, quoting M. de Caraman (Aix).

were thwarted they complained about “the authorities who were concealing the king’s orders and they said that he was willing for them to burn down the chateaux.”25 Knowing that all previous peasant risings had ended in a bloodbath, they were, at the same time, exceptionally alert to any rumor of aristocratic counteraction, hoarding, or counterrevolutionary plots. The political impulse provided by rumor was integral to the revolutionary process.

Why is it that oppressed groups so often read in rumors promises of their imminent liberation? A powerful and suppressed desire for relief from the burdens of subordination seems not only to infuse the autonomous religious life of the oppressed but also to strongly color their interpretation of events. A few examples drawn from Caribbean slavery and the Indian caste system may serve to illustrate the pattern. In the slave rebellions of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Craton shows, there was a fairly consistent belief that the king or British officials had set slaves free and that the whites were keeping the news from them.26 Barbadian slaves in 1815 came to expect they would be freed on New Year’s Day and took steps to prepare for that freedom. The colony of St. Domingue was shaken by a rumor that the king had granted slaves three free days a week and abolished the whip, but that the white masters had refused to consent.27 Slaves treated the supposed decree as an accomplished fact, and incidents of insubordination and resistance to work routines increased, leading within a short time to the revolution that would culminate in Haiti’s independence. Although we do not know much about the genesis of this particular rumor, most intimations of a coming liberation have some shred of substance behind them. The campaign for abolition, the Haitian Revolution, and the promises of freedom made by the British to any American slaves who would desert to them in the War of 1812 all proved incitements to imagine a coming freedom.

Untouchables, like slaves, are prone to read their hopes into rumor. As Mark Jürgensmeyer points out, at various times during colonial rule untouchables came to believe that the governor or his king had already raised them up and abolished untouchability.28 Coupled with utopian expectations of the British was the common untouchable conviction that the Brahmans and other high-caste Hindus had stolen the secret, liberating texts they had once possessed.29

25. Ibid., 95.
26. Craton, Testing the Chains, 244 ff.
29. Khare, The Untouchable as Himself, 85–86.
The parallels here between French peasants, slaves, untouchables, Russian serfs, and, for that matter, the cargo cults of peoples overwhelmed by Western conquest are too striking to ignore. The tendency to believe that an end to their bondage was at hand, that God or the authorities had granted their dreams, and that evil forces were keeping their freedom from them is a common, and usually tragic, occurrence among subordinated peoples. By phrasing their liberation in such terms, vulnerable groups express their hidden aspirations in public in a way that both enables them to avoid individual responsibility and aligns them with some higher power whose express commands they are merely following. Such portents have, at the same time, helped fuel countless rebellions, almost all of which have miscarried. Social theorists who assume that a hegemonic ideology encourages a naturalization of domination in which no alternatives are imagined possible, will find it hard to account for these occasions on which subordinate groups seem to pick themselves up by the bootstraps of their own collective desires. If oppressed groups misconstrue the world, it is as often to imagine that the liberation they desire is coming as to reify domination.

We have hardly begun to exhaust the many forms of anonymity deployed by subordinate groups. Almost without exception they hide the individual identity of the actor and thereby make possible a far more direct expression of verbal or physical aggression. In eighteenth-century Britain, for example, they are such a standard element in popular action that E. P. Thompson can speak convincingly of the anonymous tradition. The anonymous threat or even the individual terrorist act, is often found in a society of total clientage and dependency, on the other side of the medal of simulated deference. It is exactly in a society, where any open, identified resistance to the ruling power may result in instant retaliation, loss of home, employment, tenancy, if not victimisation at law—that one tends to find acts of darkness; the anonymous letter, arson of the stock or outhouse, houghing of cattle, the shot or brick through the window, the gate off its hinges, the orchard felled, fish pond sluices opened at night. The same man who touches his forelock to the squire by day and who goes down to history as an example of deference may kill his sheep, snare his pheasants or poison his dogs at night.

Thompson's juxtaposition of what I would term a public transcript of deferential performance with a hidden transcript of anonymous aggression in speech and act is compelling. In the anonymous, invariably threatening letters we may read what I imagine to be a fairly unvarnished rendition of what is said offline and compare it with the official performance. Thus an anonymous letter provoked by the crop damage caused by gentry hunting minces no words: "[W]e will not suffer such damned wheesing fat gutted Rogues to Starve the Poor by such hellish ways on purpose that they may follow hunting, horse-racing, etc. to maintain their families in Pride and extravagance." Anonymous threats are not merely heartfelt expressions of anger. They are, above all, threats whether they take the form of a letter or an understood sign (the unlit torch stuck in the thatch, the bullet on the doorstep, the miniature cross and grave near the house) and are intended to modify the adversary's conduct. As Thompson sees it, such actions are episodes of a counter-theater. If the gentry's courts, hunts, clothing, and church appearances are intended to overawe their dependents, then the anonymous threat and violence of the rural poor are intended "to chill the spine of gentry, magistrates, and mayors."

It goes without saying that when subordinates, individually or collectively, embark on direct attacks on the property or person of their superiors, they are likely to obscure their identity by precautions such as moving at night or wearing disguises. Poachers, arsonists, seditious messengers, and actual rebels take the same prudent steps as the highwayman. In the Catholic West the tradition of carnival provides, as we shall see, a ritual tradition that authorizes disguises coupled with direct speech and conduct that would otherwise not be tolerated. The men who dressed as women in the Rebecca Riots in Wales or in the Demoiselles protests against forest restrictions in France did not need to invent a new tradition.

These last two examples also illustrate the way in which the marginal and

30. And perhaps for the early working class as well. As Ian McKay, discussing Bourdieu's work, writes, "Bourdieu notes with evident sorrow that workers are made incapable by the deep conditioning of their childhoods to seize historical opportunities, but he might also consider those historical instances of working classes who have been seized with a sense of historical possibility which was not objectively justified. Millenarian movements have not been unknown in the working class movement." "Historians, Anthropology, and the Concept of Culture," 238.

31. To make it possible at all, Sara Evans reports that the women in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee during the civil rights movement felt obliged to remain anonymous while raising issues about the treatment of women. Their memo made its concerns explicit: "This paper is anonymous. Think about the kinds of things the author, if made known, would have to suffer because of raising this kind of discussion. Nothing so final as being fired or outright exclusion, but the kinds of things which are killing to the inside, insinuations, ridicule, over-exaggerated compensations." Personal Politics, 234.

32. "Patrician Society, Plebeian Culture," 399, emphasis added. For the details of another major nineteenth-century pattern of disguise and nighttime extortion by agricultural laborers adapting rituals of aggressive begging to their purposes, see Eric Hobsbawm and George Rude, Captain Swing.

33. Ibid.

34. Ibid., 400.
apolitical status of women in a patriarchic order can be creatively exploited. In their desperate efforts to resist Stalin's collectivization program, the peasantry realized that if women took the lead in public opposition, the worst forms of punitive retaliation might be avoided. Men might then intervene with more safety on behalf of their threatened women. As Lynn Viola explains,

peasant women's protest seems to have served as a comparatively safe outlet for peasant opposition in general and as a screen to protect the more politically vulnerable male peasants who could not oppose policy as actively or openly without serious consequences but who, nevertheless, could and did either stand silently and threateningly in the background or join in the disturbance once protest had escalated to a point where men might enter the fray as defenders of their female relations. 35

In a larger sense, some of the basic forms of popular collective action that authorities would class as mob riots should almost certainly be seen as making strategic use of anonymity as well. The popular politics of the historical mob arises particularly in situations in which permanent opposition movements are impossible to sustain but where short-run collective action may succeed by virtue of its evanescence. Thus Thompson can write of the eighteenth-century English crowd's "capacity for swift direct action. To be of a crowd or a mob was another way of being anonymous, whereas to be a member of a continuing organization was bound to expose one to detection and victimisation. The 18th century crowd well understood its capacities for action, and its own art of the possible. Its successes must be immediate, or not at all." 36 Much the same point has been made about urban crowds in France from the mid-eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth centuries. The absence of any formal organization and the apparent impromptu nature of their actions were exceptionally well adapted to an environment of power that precluded most alternative forms of direct action against the authorities. Looked at from this angle, to call such incidents spontaneous, as William Reddy notes, "is an irrelevant observation—unless we admit that the participants themselves appreciated, purposefully sought out spontaneity." 37

The likelihood that subordinate groups may often deliberately choose spontaneous forms of popular action for the anonymity and other tactical advantages they provide would, if its implications were pursued, remake our perspective of popular politics. Traditionally, the interpretation of the crowd has emphasized the relative incapacity of lower classes to sustain any coherent political movement—a regrettable consequence of their short-run materialism and passions. In time, it was hoped, such primitive forms of class action would be replaced by more permanent and farsighted movements with a leadership (perhaps from the vanguard party) seeking fundamental political change. 38 If, however, a far more tactical reading is accurate, then the choice of fleeting, direct action by crowds is hardly a sign of some political handicap or incapacity for more advanced modes of political action. Such events as market riots, "price-setting" grain and bread riots, machine breaking, the burning of tax rolls and land records by swift mob action instead may represent a popular tactical wisdom developed in conscious response to the political constraints realistically faced. Spontaneity, anonymity, and a lack of formal organization then become enabling modes of protest rather than a reflection of the slender political talents of popular classes. 39

The political advantages of impromptu action by a crowd conceal a deeper and more important form of disguise and anonymity without which such action would not be possible. While crowd action may not require formal organization, it must certainly does require effective forms of coordination and the development of an enabling popular tradition. In most respects the social coordination evident in traditional crowd action is achieved by the informal networks of community that join members of the subordinate group. Depending on the particular community, such networks may work through kinship, labor exchange, neighborhood, ritual practices, or daily occupational links (for example, fishing, pastoralism). What is important for our purposes is that these networks are socially embedded within the subordinate community and are therefore often as opaque to the authorities as they are "indispensable to sustained collective action." 40 Over time, naturally, such modes of collective action become part and parcel of popular culture, and the riot becomes something like a scenario, albeit a dangerous one, enacted by a large repertory company whose members know the basic plot and can step into the available roles. Anonymous mass action of this kind is thus entirely dependent on the existence of a social site for the hidden transcript, a site where social links and

38. I am referring particularly to Eric Hobsbawn's Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movement in the 19th and 20th Centuries, E. P. Thompson and George Rudé have written less in this vein because, I guess, they were less hobbled by a faith in the vanguard party.
39. For a path-breaking analysis of social protest in United States history that is sensitive to these issues, see Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward, Poor People's Movements: Why They Succeed, How They Fail.
40. See the argument of Frank Hearn claiming that the erosion of these "traditional" social structures was central to the political domestication of the English working class. Domination, Legitimation, and Resistance, 270.
traditions can grow with a degree of autonomy from dominant elites. In its absence, nothing of the kind would be possible.

One last form of anonymous mass action merits comment because it occurs under some of the direst forms of subordination. Here I have in mind the kind of collective protest often engaged in by prisoners rhythmically beating meal tins or rapping on the bars of their cells. Strictly speaking, the protesters are not anonymous but they nevertheless achieve a kind of anonymity by virtue of their numbers and the fact that it is seldom possible to identify who instigated or began the protest. While the form of expression is itself inherently vague, it is usually quite clear what the discontent is about from the context. Even in a total institution with little chance of creating a protected offstage site of discourse, a form of voice under domination that makes it next to impossible to single out individuals for retaliation is nevertheless achieved.

Euphemisms

If the anonymity of the messenger is often what makes it possible for the otherwise vulnerable to speak aggressively to power, one might imagine that without anonymity the performance of subordinates would revert to one of compliant deference. The alternative to complete deference, however, is to disguise the message just enough to skirt retaliation. If anonymity often encourages the delivery of an unvarnished message, the veiling of the message represents the application of varnish.

The appropriate sociolinguistic analogy for this process of varnishing is the way in which what begins as blasphemy is transformed by euphemism into a hinted blasphemy that escapes the sanctions that open blasphemy would incur.41 In Christian societies spoken oaths that “take the Lord’s name in vain” have typically been altered to more innocuous forms in order that the speaker might avoid the anger of the Almighty, not to mention that of religious leaders and the pious. Thus, the oath “Jesus” becomes “Gee Whiz” or “Geez”; “Goddamned” becomes “G.D.”; “by the blood of Christ” becomes “bloody.” Even quite secular profanities such as “shit” are transformed into “shucks.” In French the same process transforms “par Dieu” into “pardl” or “parbleu,” “je renie Dieu” into “jarnibleu.”

Euphemization is an accurate way to describe what happens to a hidden transcript when it is expressed in a power-laden situation by an actor who wishes to avoid the sanctions that direct statement will bring. Although subordinate groups are by no means the only persons to use euphemisms, they resort to it frequently because of their greater exposure to sanctions. What is left in the public transcript is an allusion to profanity without a full accomplishment of it; a blasphemy with its teeth pulled. In time the original association between the euphemism and the blasphemy that it mimics may be lost altogether, and the euphemism becomes innocuous. So long as the association persists, however, all hearers understand it as taking the place of a real blasphemy. Much of the verbal art of subordinate groups consists of clever euphemisms that, as Zora Neale Hurston noted, “were characterized by indirect, veiled, social comment and criticism, a technique appropriately described as hitting a straight lick with a crooked stick.”42

The use of euphemism as disguise is most striking in the pattern of folktales and folk culture generally among powerless groups. These more elaborate forms of veiling will be taken up later; here it is sufficient to note that euphemisms continually test the linguistic boundary of what is permissible and that often they depend for their intended effect on their being understood by powerholders. Slaves in Georgetown, South Carolina, apparently crossed that linguistic boundary when they were arrested for singing the following hymn at the beginning of the Civil War:

We’ll soon be free [repeated three times]
When the Lord will call us home.
My brudder, how long [repeated three times]
‘Fore we done suffering here?
It won’t be long [repeated three times]
‘Fore the Lord call us home.
We’ll soon be free [repeated three times]
When Jesus sets me free.
We’ll fight for liberty [repeated three times]
When the Lord will call us home.43

Slave owners took the references to “the Lord” and “Jesus” and “home” to be too thinly veiled references to the Yankees and the North. Had their gospel hymn not been found seditious the slave worshippers would have had the satisfaction of having gotten away with an oblique cry for freedom in the public transcript. At the outset of the French Revolution, peasants might often make creative use of ambiguity in order to shield themselves either from the authorities of the ancien régime or the new revolutionary authorities. Inasmuch

43. Raboteau, Slave Religion, 245.
as democracy often meant the return of traditional rights, they would shout, "Ramenez la bonne" (Bring back the good) in which it was never clear to officials whether they meant "la bonne religion," "la bonne révolution," "la bonne loi," or something else. Just as often, however, the euphemism may be intended as a threat whose force is lost unless it is taken as intended. The verbal formula of the threat, however, follows the path of euphemism in allowing the intention to be disavowed if challenged. André Abbiatici reports the following euphemisms actually used by arsonists in eighteenth-century France:

I will have you awakened by a red cock.
I will light your pipe.
I'll send a man dressed in red who will pull everything down.
I will fix you by sowing a seed that you will not soon regret.
If you take away my land, you will see Damson plums.

The purpose of these threats was virtually always to bring pressure to bear on the potential victim. If, the logic implied, he did what was required (for example, lower rents, restore forest rights, keep tenants, lower feudal dues) the arson could be avoided. So understood was the threat that it was typically delivered by an anonymous stranger or in a note. The peasants delivering the threat aimed to have their cake and eat it too; to deliver a clear threat in a form sufficiently ambiguous to escape prosecution.

Grumbling

Archibald: You're to obey me. And the text we've prepared.
Village: (banteringly) But I'm still free to speed up or draw out my recital and my performance. I can move in slow motion, can't I? I can sigh more often and more deeply.

—Genet, The Blacks

We are all familiar with grumbling or muttering as a form of veiled complaint. Usually the intention behind the grumbling is to communicate a general sense of dissatisfaction without taking responsibility for an open, specific complaint. It may be clear enough to the listener from the context exactly what the complaint is, but, via the grumble, the complainer has avoided an incident and can, if pressed, disavow any intention to complain.

44. Maurice Agulhon, La république au village: Les populations du Var de la Révolution à la seconde République, 440.

The grumble ought to be considered an instance of a broader class of thinly veiled dissent—a form that is particularly useful for subordinate groups. The class of events of which the grumble is an example would presumably include any communicative act intended to convey an indistinct and deniable sense of ridicule, dissatisfaction, or animosity. Providing such a message was imparted, almost any means of communication might serve the purpose: a groan, a sigh, a moan, a chuckle, a well-timed silence, a wink, or a stare. Consider this recent description by an Israeli officer of the stances he receives from Palestinian teenagers in the occupied West Bank: "Their eyes show hatred—no doubt. And it is a deep hatred. All the things they cannot say and all the things they feel inside of them, they put into their eyes and how they look at you." The feeling conveyed in this case is crystal clear. Knowing they might be arrested, beaten, or shot for throwing rocks, the teenagers substitute looks, which are far safer but which, nonetheless, give nearly literal meaning to the expression, "If looks could kill. . . ."

Subordinates will naturally find it more often in their interest to grumble than superiors. Once they move beyond grumbling to direct complaints, they run far greater risks of open retaliation. Knowing the advantages they enjoy in an open confrontation, superiors will often try to insist on directness, asking the grumbler to state specifically what his complaint is. Just as often, the subordinate, wishing to remain in the more favorable arena of ambiguity, will disavow having made a complaint. Much of the day-to-day political communication from highly vulnerable subordinates to their superiors is, I believe, conducted in terms of just such grumbling. Over time a pattern of muttering may develop that has much of the communicative force of a quite refined language as the timing, tune, and nuances of the complaints become quite definitely understood. This language exists alongside the language of deference without necessarily violating its prescriptions. As Erving Goffman, echoing Genet, notes, "And of course in scrupulously observing the proper forms he [the actor] may find that he is free to insinuate all kinds of disregard by carefully modifying intonation, pronunciation, pacing, and so forth." What is preserved through all of this is the facade of the public transcript. The point of grumbling is that it stops short of insubordination—to which it is a prudent

46. Thomas L. Friedman, "For Israeli Soldiers, 'War of Eyes' in West Bank," New York Times, January 5, 1988, p. A10. Such acts themselves, for that matter, need not be vague, only their meanings. Thus, Azrie Russell Hochschild describes how an angry flight attendant purposely spills a drink on the lap of a rude passenger, then apologizes, describing the event as an accident—with perhaps a suspicious hint of lightheartedness. The attendant has managed to perform what might be seen as an act of aggression and, at the same time, to control its possible consequences for her by claiming that it was inadvertent. The Managed Heart, 114.
alternative. Because the intention of making an explicit statement is denied, the need for a direct reply is also denied: officially, nothing has happened. Looked at from above, the dominant actors have permitted subordinates to grumble providing that they never infringe on the public etiquette of deference. Looked at from below, those with little power have skillfully manipulated the terms of their subordination so as to express their dissent publicly, if cryptically, without ever providing their antagonists with an excuse for a counterblow.

As with thinly veiled threats expressed in euphemisms, the message must not be so cryptic that the antagonist fails, utterly, to get the point. The purpose of grumbling is often not simply self-expression, but the attempt to bring the pressure of discontent to bear on elites. If the message is too explicit, its bearers risk open retaliation; if it is too vague, it passes unnoticed altogether. Quite often, however, what is intentionally conveyed by grumbling is an unmistakable tone, be it one of anger, contempt, determination, shock, or display. So long as the tone itself is effectively communicated, a certain vagueness may strategically heighten its impact on dominant groups. The effect of fear on one’s antagonist, for example, may be heightened if he is left free to imagine the worst. An analysis of Rastafarian dress, music, and religion suggests, along these lines, that such indirect forms of communication with Jamaican white society had certain advantages over the more straightforward language of rebellion: “Paradoxically, ‘dread’ only communicates so long as it remains incomprehensible to its intended victims, suggesting the unspeakable rites of an insatiable vengeance.”

Here the diffuseness of the Rastafarian menace amplifies its effect while at the same time providing an avenue of retreat for its adherents, who, after all, have made no particular threat.

Only on the rarest and most incendiary occasions do we ever encounter anything like an unadorned hidden transcript in the realm of public power relations. The realities of power require that it either be spoken by anonymous subordinates or be protected by disguise as rumor, gossip, euphemism, or grumbling: that dares not speak in its own name.

Elaborate Forms of Disguise: The Collective Representations of Culture

If ideological sedition were confined to the ephemeral forms of gossip, grumbling, rumor, and the occasional hostility of masked actors, it would have a marginal life indeed. The fact is that ideological insubordination of subordinate groups also takes a quite public form in elements of folk or popular culture. Given the political handicaps under which the bearers of this folk culture habitually operate, however, its public expression typically skirts the bounds of propriety. The condition of its public expression is that it be sufficiently indirect and garbled that it is capable of two readings, one of which is innocuous. As with a euphemism, it is the innocuous meaning—however tasteless it may be considered—that provides an avenue of retreat when challenged. These ambiguous, polysemic elements of folk culture mark off a relatively autonomous realm of discursive freedom on the condition that they declare no direct opposition to the public transcript as authorized by the dominant.

Major elements of popular (as distinct from elite) culture may come to embody meanings that potentially undercut if not contradict their official interpretation. There are at least three reasons why the culture of subordinate groups should reflect the smuggling of portions of the hidden transcript, suitably veiled, onto the public stage.

Insofar as folk or popular culture is the property of a social class or strata whose social location generates distinctive experiences and values, we should expect those shared characteristics to appear in their ritual, dance, drama, dress, folktales, religious beliefs, and so forth. Max Weber was not the only social analyst to notice that the religious convictions of the “disprivileged” reflected an implicit protest against their worldly fate. In a sectarian spirit fostered by their resentments, they were likely to envision an eventual reversal or leveling of worldly fortunes and rank, to emphasize solidarity, equality, mutual aid, honesty, simplicity, and emotional fervor. The distinctiveness of subordinate group cultural expression is created in large part by the fact that in this realm at least, the process of cultural selection is relatively democratic. Their members, in effect, select those songs, tales, dances, texts, and rituals that they choose to emphasize, they adopt them for their own use, and they of course create new cultural practices and artifacts to meet their felt needs. What survives and flourishes within the folk culture of serfs, slaves, and peasants is largely dependent on what they decide to accept and transmit. This is not to imply that the realm of cultural practices is unaffected by the dominant culture; only that it is less effectively patrolled than, say, the realm of production.

The second reason why subordinate groups might wish to find ways of expressing dissonant views through their cultural life is simply as a riposte to an official culture that is almost invariably demeaning. The culture of the aristocrat, lord, slave masters, and higher castes is, after all, largely designed

to distinguish these ruling groups from the mass of peasants, serfs, slaves, and untouchables beneath them. In the case of peasant societies, for example, the existing cultural hierarchy holds out a model of behavior for civilized man that the peasantry lacks the cultural and material resources to emulate. Whether it is a matter of knowing the sacred texts, of speaking and dressing properly, of table manners and gestures, of performing elaborate ceremonies of initiation, marriage, or burial, of patterns of taste and cultural consumption, peasants are asked, in effect, to worship a standard that is impossible for them to achieve. In traditional China, for example, literacy was a critical means of stratification and implied, as a Sung encyclopaedist pointed out, that "people who know ideographs are wise and worthy, whereas those who do not know ideographs are simple and stupid."49 Inasmuch as the cultural dignity and status of ruling groups are typically established through the systematic deplorization and indignities imposed on subordinate classes, it is not surprising that commoners are not likely to share these assumptions with quite the same fervor.

Finally, what permits subordinate groups to undercut the authorized cultural norms is the fact that cultural expression by virtue of its polyvalent symbolism and metaphor lends itself to disguise. By the subtle use of codes one can insinuate into a ritual, a pattern of dress, a song, a story, meanings that are accessible to one intended audience and opaque to another audience the actors wish to exclude. Alternatively, the excluded (and in this case, powerful) audience may grasp the seditious message in the performance but find it difficult to react because that sedition is clothed in terms that also can lay claim to a perfectly innocent construction. Astute slaveholders undoubtedly realized that the attention to Joshua and Moses in slave Christianity had something to do with their prophetic roles as liberators of the Israelites from bondage. But, since they were, after all, Old Testament prophets, slaves could hardly be punished for revering them as part of their—authorized—Christian faith.

Two brief examples may help suggest how such coding might take place. The first concerns the cult of the Japanese village elder and martyr Sakura Sagoro as it grew from his execution in 1653 until the eighteenth century.50 Sakura was crucified by the lords of the Narita area for having presented a petition on behalf of his oppressed villagers, petitioning being a capital crime. Presumably because he was martyred in their interests, the peasantry celebrated his spirit (with a vengeance!), and he became the most famous case of the "righteous man" (gmin) who sacrifices himself for the welfare of his people." The cult of Sakura through its shrine, through tales told by minstrels and troupes of puppeteers, plays, and the worship of his spirit as a Buddhist savior became something of a focus of popular solidarity and resistance. Thus far, the disguise here seems minimal except for the fact that it takes the form of a cult rather than direct political resistance. The more public manifestations of the cult in, say, public drama were, however, very carefully phrased in terms of the virtues of benevolent government. If peasants demanded land, they demanded it in order to be able to pay the taxes of the lord. What was new, and implicitly seditious, was that the achievement of justice was now shifted to peasant action rather than being left to noblesse oblige. The cult and its elaborations apparently played a vital role in creating and maintaining a peasant subculture of collective resistance to impositions from above.

Filipino use of the Christian tradition of the passion play to convey a general, yet guarded, dissent from elite culture is another striking example of the pattern. As Reynaldo Ietto has deftly shown, a cultural form that might have been taken to represent the submission of the Filipinos to the religion of their colonial masters and resignation before a cruel fate was infused with quite divergent meaning.51 In its many variants performed throughout Tagalog society during Holy Week, the vernacular pasyon managed to negate much of the cultural orthodoxy of the Spanish and their local, Hispanicized illustrado allies. Traditional authority figures were ignored or repudiated, horizontal solidarity replaced loyalty to patrons, those placed most lowly (the poor, servants, victims) were shown to be most noble, the institutional church was criticized, and millennial hopes were entertained. Quite apart from the thematic ideas embedded in the performances, the actual organization and performance of the play was a powerful social tie uniting ordinary Filipinos. The vehicle for all of this was, of course, a church ritual authorized from above—a fact that made it a more sheltered social site for subversive meanings. This is not at all to claim a premeditated and cynical manipulation of the passion play; rather it was simply that the religious experience of ordinary Filipinos gradually infused this folk ritual which came to represent their sensibilities—within the limits of what might be ventured in comparative safety. Ietto shows how the ideology implicit in the pasyon appears in militant garb in a large number of violent uprisings, including, most notably, the popular movements associated with the revolution against Spain and local tyrants at the end of the nineteenth century. Nor is it a question of a mere affinity between the two. More accurately, one would have to say that the pasyon, appropriated by ordinary Filipinos, help create a shared subordinate

51. The material for this discussion is drawn from Ietto, "Pasyon and Revolution," passim.
ethos through its public—if disguised—enactment in folk ritual. Far from being confined to the social sites of the hidden transcript, the Tagalog population, like other subordinate groups, continued to give their deviant and resistant social visions a fugitive existence in public discourse.52

Oral Culture as Popular Disguise

The great bulk of lower-class cultural expression has typically taken an oral rather than a written form. Oral traditions, due simply to their means of transmission, offer a kind of seclusion, control, and even anonymity that make them ideal vehicles for cultural resistance. To appreciate how the folk song, the folktale, the joke, and of course, Mother Goose rhymes have borne a heavy weight of seditious meanings, the structure of oral traditions merits brief elaboration.53

We are all aware that speech, particularly informal speech between friends or intimates, is likely to take greater liberties in syntax, grammar, and allusions than formal speech, let alone print. What is less often appreciated is how even modern, print-dominated societies contain a large contemporary oral tradition that is generally ignored by cultural historians. As Robert Graves trenchantly observed,

When a future historian comes to treat of the social taboos of the 19th and 20th centuries in a fourteen volume life work, his theories of the existence of an enormous secret language of bawdry and an immense oral literature of obscene stories and rhymes known, in various degrees of initiation, to every man and woman in the country, yet never consigned to writing or openly admitted as existing will be treated as a chimerical notion by the enlightened age in which he writes.54

If this much can be said about a relatively literate and socially integrated industrial country, how much more vast and significant would be the oral culture of subordinate groups whose culture directly concerns us?

The anonymity possible within oral culture derives from the fact that it exists in only impermanent forms through being spoken and performed. Each enactment is thus unique as to time, place, and audience as well as different from every other enactment. Like gossip or rumor, the folk song is taken up and performed or learned at the option of its listeners and, in the long run, its origins are lost altogether. It becomes impossible to recover some version from which all subsequent renditions are deviations. In other words, there is no orthodoxy or center to folk culture since there is no primary text to serve as the measure of heresy. The practical result is that folk culture achieves the anonymity of collective property, constantly being adjusted, revised, abbreviated, or, for that matter, ignored. The multiplicity of its authors provides its protective cover, and when it no longer serves current interests sufficiently to find performers or an audience, it simply vanishes forever.55 Individual performers and composers can take refuge, like the originator of a rumor, behind this anonymity. A collector of Serbian folk songs thus complained, “Everyone denies responsibility [for having composed a new song], even the true composer and says he heard it from someone else.”56

Strictly speaking, written communication is more effectively anonymous than spoken communication. Anonymous circulars can be prepared in secret, delivered in secret, and unsigned, whereas oral communication (before the telephone) is exchanged between at least two known individuals—unless they are themselves in disguise. From the point of view of concealment, however, the disadvantage of writing is that once a text is out of the author’s hands, control over its use and dissemination is lost.57 The advantage of communication by voice (including gestures, clothes, dance, and so on) is that the communicator retains control over the manner of its dissemination—the audience, the place, the circumstances, the rendition. Control, then, of oral culture is irretrievably decentralized. A given folktale, for example, may be retold or ignored and, if retold, may be abbreviated, enlarged, changed, spoken in completely different forms or dialects according to the interests, tastes, and also the fears of the speaker. For this reason the realm of private conversation is the most difficult for even the most persistent police apparatuses to penetrate. Part of the relative immunity of the spoken word from surveillance

52. For a valuable account of how rituals can be adapted to take on new, subversive meanings that are opaque to the powerful, see Robert Weller’s analysis of the Festival of the Hungry Ghosts in Taiwan during the Japanese occupation. “The Politics of Ritual Disguise: Repression and Response in Taiwanese Popular Religion.”
54. Lars Pensio, on the Future of Swearing and Improper Language, 55.
55. In societies in which a literate class exists, a version may, of course, survive, and the form may be recovered. Once a written version of an oral text is collected (for example, Homer’s Odyssey), it may take on a fundamentally different life.
56. Burke, Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe, 115.
57. The secrecy of oral communication can of course serve elite interests as well: gentlemen’s agreements, oral instructions that can be disavowed, and so on. Max Weber notes that the sacred knowledge of the Brahmin was transmitted orally for centuries and it was forbidden to set it down in writing for fear lower castes would break their monopoly of esoteric knowledge. Weber, The Sociology of Religion, 67. The “disavowability” of oral communication is undoubtedly the reason behind the contemporary adage to “get it in writing.”
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 irressible.

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 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 evry 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 he 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

58. For an account of the Central Sulawesi trickster Panunggel, 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.

59. Cited in Levine, Black Culture and Black Consciousness, 81.
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.
raconteur could claim simply to be passing on a story for which he or she had no responsibility—in the way one may distance oneself from a joke that one claims to have overheard. The story in this case is obviously a story about animals, a fantasy story at that, which has nothing to do with human society. A teller of a Brer Rabbit tale could also select from among a host of stories and could adjust any particular tale to suit the circumstances.

Within this relatively veiled context, however, the slave could identify with the protagonist, who managed to outwit, ridicule, torture, and destroy his more powerful enemy while at the same time inserting the narrative into an apparently innocuous context. It goes without saying, as well, that these tales had an instructive, cautionary side. Identifying with Brer Rabbit, the slave child learned, as he or she learned in other ways, that safety and success depended on curbing one's anger and channeling it into forms of deception and cunning, where one's chances of success were greater. What they taught, the tales also celebrated as a source of pride and satisfaction. What is being celebrated is not adequately captured by the loaded English term cunning.63

The celebration of guile and cleverness was hardly confined to the Brer Rabbit tales. It can be found in the High John (or Old John) tales64 and the Coyote tales, not to mention proverbs and songs, all of which were the public face of an oral culture that reinforced a certain hatred of the powerful and a worship of the persistence and agility of the underdog.

It is customary to treat oral traditions like the Brer Rabbit tales as communication among slaves and then to gauge their role in the socialization of a spirit of resistance. What this ignores is the publicness of the Brer Rabbit stories. They were not told just offstage in the slave quarters. The place of such tales as part of the public transcript suggests a line of interpretation. It suggests that, for any subordinate group, there is tremendous desire and will to express publicly what is in the hidden transcript, even if that form of expression must use metaphors and allusions in the interest of safety. The hidden transcript, as it were, presses against and tests the limits of what may be safely ventured in terms of a reply to the public transcript of deference and conformity. Analytically, then, one can discern a dialogue with the dominant public culture in the public transcript as well as in the hidden transcript. Reading the dialogue from the hidden transcript is to read a more or less direct reply, with no holds barred, to elite homilies. The directness is possible, of course, only because it occurs offstage, outside the power-laden domain. Reading the dialogue from the public oral traditions of subordinate groups requires a more nuanced and literary reading simply because the hidden transcript has had to costume itself and speak more warily. It succeeds best—and one imagines is most appreciated too—when it dares to preserve as much as possible of the rhetorical force of the hidden transcript while skirting danger.

The slaves' dialogue with the masters, then, proceeds on three levels. First, there is the official public culture, which might be represented by this extract from a catechism prepared for slaves in the antebellum U.S. South:

Q. Are not servants bound to obey their masters?
A. Yes, the Bible exhorts servants to be obedient to their masters, and to please them well in all things. . .
Q. If the master is unreasonable, may the servant disobey?
A. No, the Bible says, "Servants, be subject to your masters in all fear, not only to the good and gentle, but also to the forward. . . ."
Q. If servants suffer unjustly, what are they to do?
A. They must bear it patiently.65

At this level, in the midst of a ritual of subordination monitored by those in authority, slaves had little choice but to deliver up the performance required of them—though they might by small gestures indicate their lack of enthusiasm. Offstage, on the other hand, they might directly repudiate their command performance. If we examine the narratives of slaves who came North, we can find evidence of this offstage negation. Two plausible replies might have been, "But I did not regard it [pilfering] as stealing then; I do not regard it as such now. I hold that a slave has a moral right to eat, drink, and wear all that he needs . . because it was the labor of my own hands."66 Or, a direct cry of vengeance rather than humility might be apparent from the actual religious convictions of slaves: "They are deceived who imagine that he arises from his knees, with back lacerated and bleeding cherishing only a spirit of meekness and forgiveness. A day may come—it will come if his prayer is heard—a terrible day of vengeance when the master in his turn will cry for mercy."67

63. As Detienne and Vernant have explained at great length, the ancient Greeks greatly admired this quality, which they called métis and which "combine[s] flair, wisdom, forethought, subtlety of mind, deception, resourcefulness, vigilance, opportunism, various skills and experience acquired over the years. It is applied in situations which are transient, shifting, disconcerting, and ambiguous, situations which do not lend themselves to precise measurement, exact calculation, or rigorous logic." Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant, Cunning Intelligence in Greek Culture and Society, trans. Janet Lloyd, 3-4; see also p. 44. For a thirteenth-century Arabic compilation of thousands of clever tricks known to have been successfully used to outwit enemies, see René H. Khamwah, trans., The Subtle Race: The Book of Arabic Wisdom and Guile.
65. Ososky, Puttin' on Ole Massa, 32-33.
66. From the narrative of William Wells Brown in ibid., 166.
67. From the narrative of Solomon Northrup in ibid., 363.
Allowing for the formality of writing and an audience of white northerners, we can imagine the unvarnished oral versions of these replies that might have been voiced in the slave quarters.

What the Brer Rabbit stories represent, I believe, is the muffled, oblique version of the direct replies quoted above. The same would hold true for much of the oral culture of subordinate groups. It may seem that the heavy disguise this reply wears must all but eliminate the pleasure it gives. While it is surely less satisfying than an open declaration of the hidden transcript it nevertheless achieves something the backstage can never match. It carves out a public, if provisional, space for the autonomous cultural expression of dissent. If it is disguised, it is at least not hidden; it is spoken to power. This is no small achievement of voice under domination.

**Symbolic Inversion, World-Upside-Down Prints**

If the slaves' oral tradition of Brer Rabbit stories was sufficiently opaque and innocuous to allow public telling, the pan-European tradition of “world-upside-down” drawings and prints must be counted as rather more daring.

68. Burke notes that the Catholic Indexes of the late fifteenth century banned the publication of some ballads and chapbooks, notably *Till Eulenspiegel* and *Reynard the Fox*. Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe, 220.

69. See, in this context, Lila Abu-Lughod’s striking analysis of Bedouin women’s poetry as a disguised counterpoint to official, male values of honor. As she notes, “Poetry cloaks statements in the veils of formula, convention, and tradition, thus fitting it to the task of conveying messages about the self that contravene the official cultural ideals.” “As noted, the ghinnawa (poem) is a highly formulaic and stylized verbal genre.” “Formula renders content impersonal or non-individual, allowing people to dissociate themselves from the sentiments they express, if revealed to the wrong audience, by claiming that ‘it was just a song.’” *Veiled Sentiments*, 239.

70. One of the most effective and common ways subordinates may express resistance is by embedding it in a larger context of symbolic compliance. This pattern relates directly to the earlier discussion of the use-value of hegemony but merits brief comment here as a form of disguise. The pattern to which I wish to call attention was apparent in the weekly protests by Argentine mothers in Buenos Aires’s Plaza de Mayo demanding that the military regime account for the disappearance of their children. Here was, in effect, an act of open defiance against a repressive regime responsible for the extrajudicial murder of thousands of opponents. And yet the protests continued and grew into a key antiregime ritual. Their relative immunity from summary violence sprang, I believe, from their structural appeal to just those paternalistic values of religion, family, morality, and virility to which the right-wing regime gave constant lip service. In a public ideology that implicitly respected women, above all, in their roles as mothers or virginal daughters, these women were demonstrating as mothers on behalf of their children. An open attack on women acting in this particular capacity and disavowing any other motive would have been quite awkward for the public standing of the regime. As any dominant ideology does, this ideology not only excluded certain forms of activity as illegitimate, it also, perhaps inadvertently, created a small niche of opportunity that was utilized by the mother of the desaparecido. By clothing their defiance in hegemonic dress, these women were able to challenge the regime in other respects.

Enormously popular throughout Europe, especially after the advent of printing in the sixteenth century made them accessible to the lower classes, these prints depicted a topsy-turvy world in which all the normal relations and hierarchies were inverted. Mice ate cats, children spanked parents, the hare snared the hunter, the cart pulled the horse, fishermen were pulled from the water by fish, the wife beat the husband, the ox slaughtered the butcher, the poor man gave alms to the rich man, the goose put the cook into the pot, the king on foot led a peasant on horseback, fish flew in the air, and so on in seemingly endless profusion. By and large each of these broadsheets, standard items in the sacks of colporteurs, reversed a customary relationship of hierarchy or predation or both. The underdog took revenge, just as he did in the Brer Rabbit tales.

Before turning to the vital question of how the world-upside-down broadsheets should be interpreted, I must stress that they did not stand by themselves, but nested in a popular culture brimming over with images of reversal. Such themes could be found in satirical songs, in popular theater where the lower-class clown and commentator (for example, Falstaff) might exchange clothes and roles with his master, in the rich traditions of carnival (a ritual of reversal), and widespread millennial expectations. The symbolic opulence of popular culture was such that a single symbol could represent virtually an entire worldview. Thus Le Roy Ladurie notes that any one of several carnival symbols—the green bough, the rake, the onion, or the Swiss trumpet—was understood to represent leveling—whether of food, property, status, wealth, or authority. Popular sayings that implicitly questioned the distinction between commoner and noble were popular and widely disseminated. The seditious couplet usually linked to John Ball and the Peasants’ Revolt of 1381, “When Adam delved and Eve span, / Who was then the gentleman?” could be found in nearly identical form in other Germanic languages (for example, German, Dutch, Swedish) and, slightly altered, in Slavic and romance languages as well.

The world-upside-down tradition can, of course, be taken to have no political significance whatever. As a trick of a playful imagination—a simple jeu d’esprit—it may mean nothing more than that. More commonly, the tradition is occasionally seen in functionalist terms as a safety-valve or vent


72. *Carnival in Romans*, 77.

that, like carnival, harmlessly drains away social tensions that might otherwise become dangerous to the existing social order. In a slightly more ominous version of this argument, it is suggested that world-upside-down prints and other rituals of reversal are something of a conspiracy of the dominant, actually devised by them as a symbolic substitute for the real thing. Functional arguments of this kind, especially when they rely on conspiracies that would have every reason to remain concealed, cannot be refuted directly. What can be done, I think, is to show how implausible such a perspective is and how the circumstantial evidence leads firmly in the opposite direction.

Admittedly, it is impossible to envision a world upside down without beginning with a world right side up of which it is the mirror image. The same is true by definition for any cultural negation; the hippie's life-style represents a protest only by being seen against the background of middle-class conformity; the proclamation of one's atheism makes sense only in a world filled with religious believers. Inversions of this kind do, however, play an important imaginative function, even if they accomplish nothing else. They do, at least at the level of thought, create an imaginative breathing space in which the normal categories of order and hierarchy are less than completely inevitable. It is not obvious why dominant groups would want to encourage anything that didn't entirely reify or naturalize the existing social distinctions they benefit from. And if it is claimed that this is a cultural concession they must make to ensure order, it suggests that such inversions are less something granted than something insisted on from below. When we manipulate any social classification imaginatively—turning it inside out and upside down—we are forcibly reminded that it is to some degree an arbitrary human creation.

Far from encouraging the production and circulation of world-upside-down broadsheets, the authorities did what they could to limit their circulation. A popular series of prints called "the war of the rats against the cat" was considered a particularly subversive inversion. In 1797 in a Holland recently occupied by French revolutionary troops, authorities seized both the publisher and his stock of such prints. Under Peter the Great, Russian censors insisted on changes in prints of the cat so that it wouldn't be seen to resemble their czar. In 1842 czarist officials seized all known copies of a very large print depicting an ox slaughtering the butcher. Its seditionary import, apparent to those in charge of preventing protest, would not, we must imagine, have been lost on the wider public who came across it. Not content with restricting potentially subversive popular culture, the authorities not uncommonly pro-

duced and disseminated the popular culture they thought appropriate for the lower orders. Books of proverbs reminiscent of the slaves' catechism were circulated. Given their content, for example, "Hunger costs little, anger much," "Poverty is good for many (all) things," "Too much justice is injustice," "Each should behave according to his rank," it is not surprising that they found a reader audience among those of higher status. When nothing was readily at hand to reply to a threatening popular culture, defamatory verse might be commissioned for the occasion. That, as noted in the previous chapter, was how the bishop of Würzburg attempted to undercut the anticlerical appeal of the drummer of Niklashausen in late fifteenth-century Germany. And in their cultural offensive against the heresies of William Tell, they produced woodcuts that gave the peasant an animal's face and depicted his moral viciousness. The point of these brief illustrations is simply that world-upside-down imagery was not endorsed as a form of cultural anesthesia by elites but rather was made the object of suppression and counteroffensives.

What are we to make, however, of the mixture of implicit social critique with inversions that either have no obvious social content or that actually violate the physical laws of nature? It takes no interpretive leap of faith to see the subversive import of the following sorts of broadsheets: the lord serves a peasant at table; the poor man hands his sweat and blood to the rich; Christ wears a crown of thorns while, next to him, the pope wears a triple gold tiara; the peasant stands over the lord, who is digging or hoeing. Such imagery is, however, typically combined with two other kinds of prints. First, prints in which, say, two geese turn a human on a spit over a fire. Here, the meaning is not obvious, although who normally roasts and eats whom is being reversed. The common use—far more common than today—of analogies from the barnyard and agrarian life to describe human relations makes a seditious reading of the print that much more plausible. After all, when Winstanley, in the English Civil War, wanted to describe the relationship between property law and the poor, he dramatized it in familiar terms: "The law is the fox, poor men are the geese; he pulls off their feathers and feeds upon them." A seditious reading of the geese roasting a man is, of course, disavowable; that is why it is cast in equivocal terms. Given the codes and imagery then in circulation, a subversive interpretation is also available.

The prints depicting scenes such as fish flying in the air and birds under the water pose a somewhat different problem. At one level they simply com-

75. Ibid., 74.
76. Burke, Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe, 160.
plete or extend a series of inversions. At another level one might claim that their purpose is to make a mockery of all the inversions by implying that they are at least as preposterous as fish flying in the air. On this reading, the aggregate effect of the upside-down broadsheets would be symbolically to rule out any reversals of the social hierarchy. Here, I believe, the element of disguise plays a vital role. As public popular culture the world-upside-down prints are disguised by the anonymity of their authorship, by the ambiguity of their meaning, and by the addition of obviously harmless material. The wish for a reversal of the social hierarchy becomes public, in such conditions, only on condition that it is Janus-faced. As David Kunze, the most searching student of this genre of popular culture, concludes,

The essential ambivalence of WUD [world upside down] permits, according to the circumstances, those satisfied with the existing or traditional social order to see the theme as a mockery of the idea of changing that order around, and at the same time, those dissatisfied with that order to see the theme as mocking it in its present perverted state.

. . .

The truly impossible, the "purely playful" fantasies involving animals . . . functions as a masking mechanism for the dangerous, vindictive, anarchic, "childish," but otherwise suppressed or unconscious desires which are embedded in the less than impossible human reversals.77

Kunze's interpretation, moreover, coincides with other readings of how heretical messages might be successfully coded at this time. The potentially inflammatory prophecies of the sixteenth-century abbot Joachim of Fiore, which were to play a role in many millennial movements, were disseminated in part by a series of ambiguous pictures. An empty throne might thus be taken as an endorsement of the hermit-pope Celestine or as the beginning of a spiritual revolution; a representation of the pope holding his mitre over a crowned or horned animal that has a human face might be taken as the lamb of God, as a secular ruler, or as the anti-Christ. Viewing them in historical context, however, Marjorie Reeves claims, "the main thrust of the prophecies is clear. These Joachites were able through these symbols, to make veiled but bitter commentary on the contemporary papacy and then to highlight the Joachite expectation."78

 Reeves might, more accurately perhaps, have written, "bitter because veiled" inasmuch as it was the veiling that permitted the prophecies to be disseminated in this public fashion at all.79

If world-upside-down broadsheets were either innocuous or soporific, we would not expect to find them figuring so prominently in actual rebellions and in the imagery and actions of the insurgents themselves. In the Reformation and in the subsequent Peasants' War, the prints play an undeniable major role in disseminating the spirit of revolution. As the conflict became open and violent, the imagery became more direct: a Lutheran cartoon showed a peasant decapitating into the papal tiara. The prints associated with the peasant revolutionaries under Thomas Münzer pictured "peasants disputing with learned theologians, ramming the scriptures down the throat of priests, and pulling down the tyrant's castle."80 When a captured rebel was asked (rhetorically) what kind of beast he was, he replied, "A beast that usually feeds on roots and wild herbs but, when driven by hunger, sometimes consumes priests, bishops, and fat citizens."81 Not only did such radical ideas— an end to status distinctions, the abolition of differences in wealth, popular justice, and popular religion, revenge on exploiting priest, nobles, and wealthy townsmen—play a rhetorical role in the Peasants' War, but there are instances in which the rebels turned the images of inversion into tableaux vivants. One peasant leader thus dressed a countess up like a beggar and sent her off in a dung cart; knights, now in rags, were obliged to serve their vassals at table while peasants dressed up in knighthly garb and mocked their noble rituals.82

This once, briefly, peasants had the opportunity to live their fantasies and dreams of revenge, and those fantasies might have been read from the world-upside-down prints.

Many of the same aspirations among serfs and the lower classes generally can be found in the context of the English Civil War and the French Revolution. The popular movement in the English Civil War, among other popular goals, sought to eliminate honorific forms of address and the status distinctions that

---

77. "World Upside Down," 82, 89, emphasis added.
78. Reeves, "Some Popular Prophecies from the 14th to 17th Centuries," in Popular Belief and Practice: Papers Read at the 9th Summer Meeting and 10th Winter Meeting of the Ecclesiastical History Society, ed. G. J. Cuming and Derek Baker, 107-34.
79. There appears to be something of a Japanese equivalent to the world-upside-down tradition. Nagita and Scheiner write, "In Edo, for example, the spirit of yonaoshi [Buddhist new world—a millennial vision] and hostility toward the rich become associated with the namazu (carp). Immediately after the great Edo earthquake in 1855, a series of unsigned prints depicted the namazu which supported the world as avenging itself on the rich and crafty who had exploited the poor. . . . Prints now showed him propped on the bodies of the rich as he forced them to excrete and vomit forth coins and jewels for the poor. Such prints also depicted the uchi koipushi [wrecking the homes of rich or officials]. . . . 'Herewiue we, the people, attained our cherished desire,' read the caption under one of the prints." Japanese Thought in the Tokugawa Period 38.
81. Ibid., 63.
82. Ibid., 64.
generated them, to divide up the land, eliminate lawyers and priests, and so on. During the French Revolution, sansculottes scouring the countryside for provisions would occasionally bivouac in a chateau and insist on being served by the nobility: "The commissaires would get their victims to cook them copious meals, which they had then to serve standing up, while the commissaires themselves sat down with the local gendarmes and artisan members of the local comité—a Passion Play in Food egalitarianism that was performed over and over again in the areas subjected to ultra-revolutionism." As if to generalize such new rituals, a revolutionary print showed a peasant riding a nobleman and carried the inscription, "I knew our turn was coming." All this evidence suggests such traditions as world-upside-down prints represent the public portion of the reply, the counterculture in a quite literal sense, to a dominant transcript of hierarchy and deference. If it is muted or ambiguous, this is because it must be evasive if it is to be public at all. The vision it propagates is reinforced by a utopian reading of religious texts, folktales and songs and, of course, by the large and uncensored realm of the hidden transcript. When the conditions that constrain this evasive popular culture are, as occasionally happens, relaxed, we may expect to see the disguises become less opaque as more of the hidden transcript shoulders its way onto the stage and into action.

Rituals of Reversal, Carnival and Fêtes

_I never heard the proclamations of generals before battle, the speeches of führers and prime-ministers . . . national anthems, temperance tracts, papal encyclicals and sermons against gambling and contraception without seeming to hear in the background a chorus of raspberries from all the millions of common men to whom these high sentiments make no appeal._

—GEORGE ORWELL

Laughter contains something revolutionary. In the church, in the palace, on parade, facing the department head, the police officer, the German administration, nobody laughs. The serfs are deprived of the right to smile in the presence of the landowners. Only equals may laugh. If inferiors are permitted to laugh in front of their superiors, and if they cannot suppress their hilarity, this would mean farewell to respect.

—ALEXANDER HERZEN

If the raspberries to which Orwell refers have a privileged social and temporal location, it is surely in the pre-Lenten tradition of carnival. As the occasion for rituals of reversal, satire, parody, and a general suspension of social constraints, carnival offers a unique analytical vantage point from which to dissect social order. Precisely because carnival has generated such a large and often-distinguished literature, we can assess it as an institutionalized form of political disguise. The availability of this literature makes the choice of carnival a matter of analytical convenience only. For there are scores of festivals, fairs, and ritual occasions that share many of the essential features of carnival itself. The Feast of Fools, charivari, coronations, periodic market fairs, harvest celebrations, spring fertility rights, and even traditional elections share something of the carnivalesque. Furthermore, it is difficult to find any culture that does not have something on the order of a carnival event in its ritual calendar. Thus there is the Feast of Krishna (Holi) in Hindu society, the water festival in much of mainland Southeast Asia, the Saturnalia in ancient Roman society, and so on.

What all these occasions seem to share is that they are socially defined in some important ways as being out of the ordinary. Normal rules of social intercourse are not enforced, and either the wearing of actual disguises or the anonymity conferred by being part of a large crowd amplifies a general air of license—licentiousness. Much of the writing on carnival emphasizes the spirit of physical abandon, its celebration of the body through dancing, gluttony, open sexuality, and general immodesty. The classical carnival figure is a fat, lusty eater and drinker; the spirit of Lent, which follows, is a thin, old woman.

For our purposes, what is most interesting about carnival is the way it allows certain things to be said, certain forms of social power to be exercised that are muted or suppressed outside this ritual sphere. The anonymity of the setting, for example, allows the social sanctions of the small community normally exercised through gossip to assume a more full-throated voice. Among other things, carnival is "the people's informal courtroom" in which biting songs and scolding verse can be sung directly to the disrespected and malefactors. The young can scold the old, women can ridicule men, cuckolded or henpecked husbands may be openly mocked, the bad-tempered and stingy can be satirized, muted personal vendettas and factional strife can be expressed. Disapproval that would be dangerous or socially costly to vent at other times is sanctioned during carnival. It is the time and place to settle, verbally at least, personal and social scores.

Carnival, then, is something of a lightning rod for all sorts of social tensions and animosities. In addition to being a festival of the physical senses it

83. The best description of this movement is still Christopher Hill's remarkable The World Turned Upside Down, passim.
84. Cobb, _The Police and the People_, 174–75.
85. Burke, _Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe_, 189 and pl. 20.
86. Gilmore, _Aggression and Community_, 99.
is a festival of spleen and bile. Much of the social aggression within carnival is
directed at dominant power figures, if for no other reason than the fact that
such figures are, by virtue of their power, virtually immune from open crit-
cicism at other times. Any local notables who had incurred popular wrath—
merciless usurers, soldiers who were abusive, corrupt local officials, priests
who were avid or lascivious—might find themselves the target of a concerted
carnival attack by their erstwhile inferiors. Satirical verses might be chanted in
front of their houses, they might be burned in effigy, and they might be
extorted by masked and threatening crowds to distribute money or drink and
made to publicly repent. Institutions as well as persons came under attack.
The church, in particular, was an integral part of the ritual mockery of car-
nival. In fact, every conceivable sacred rite had its counterpart in a carnival
parody: sermons in praise of thieves or of St. Hareng (the fish), travesties of
the catechism, the creed, the Psalms, the Ten Commandments, and so forth.87
Here was something of an open dialogue, suitably elusive, between a
heterodox popular religion and an official hierarchy of piety. Hardly any
pretension to superior status—legal knowledge, title, classical learning, high
tastes, military prowess, or property—went unscathed by the leveling tech-
niques of carnival.

As one might reasonably expect, class and political antagonisms could also
be aired through carnival techniques. David Gilmore’s account of how the
growing animosity in twentieth-century Andalusia between agricultural la-
borers and landowners affected carnival is instructive.88 Initially, both classes
participated in carnival, the landowners tolerating the ridicule and satirical
verses sung to them. As agrarian conditions worsened, the abuse and threats
drove the landowners to withdraw and watch carnival from their balconies.
For some time now the landowners actually leave town for the duration of
carnival, abandoning it to their antagonists. Two aspects of this schematic
account bear emphasis. First, it reminds us that such rituals are far from static
but are rather likely to reflect the changing structure and antagonisms within a
society. Second, carnival is, par excellence, an occasion for recriminations
from subordinate groups, presumably because normal power relations oper-
ate to silence them. As Gilmore notes, “In particular, the poor and the power-
less used the occasion to express their accumulated resentments against the
rich and powerful, to indict social injustice, as well as to chastise peasant
offenders against the moral traditions of the pueblo, its ethics, its norms of
honesty.”89 The privileged outspokenness of carnival might even come to
constitute a kind of national politics in societies in which direct commentary
might be treasonous or lèse-majesté. Thus, the carnival effigy might be made
up to look like whoever was the municipal enemy of the day—for example,
Mazarin, the pope, Luther, Louis XVI, Marie Antoinette, Napoleon III. But
always these forays into the public transcript were politically sheltered by the
license and anonymity of carnival and “a way of scoffing at authority by
allusions which are simultaneously evident and innocent, by an insolence
sufficiently ambiguous to disarm or ridicule the repression.”90

The great contribution of Bakhtin to the study of the carnivalesque was to
let it treat it, through Rabelais’s prose, as the ritual location of uninhibited speech. It
was the only place where undominated discourse prevailed, where there was no
servility, false pretenses, obsequiousness, or etiquettes of circumlocution. If,
in carnival and the marketplace, profanities and curses prevailed, that was
because the euphemisms required by official discourse were unnecessary. If so
much of the carnivalesque was focused on the functions we share with lower
mammals—eating and drinking, defecation, fornication, flatulence—that is
because this is the level at which we are all alike and no one can claim a higher
status. Above all, these free zones were places where one could relax and
breathe easily, not having to worry about committing a costly faux pas. For the
lower classes, who spent much of their lives under the tension created by
subordination and surveillance, the carnivalesque was a realm of release:91
“Officially the palaces, churches, institutions and private homes were domi-
nated by hierarchy and etiquette, but in the marketplace a special kind of
speech was heard, almost a language of its own, quite unlike the language of
the church, palace, courts, and institutions. It was also unlike the tongue of
official literature or of the ruling classes—the aristocracy, the nobles, the
high-rank clergy, the top burghers.”92 Bakhtin wants us to take carnival
speech as something of a shadow society in which the distortions created by

87. Burke, Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe, 123.
88. Aggression and Community, chap. 6.
89. Ibid., 98. It is useful in this context to recall that during carnival the use of social
sanctions against members of one’s own class may have the purpose of disciplining those who are
trying to curry favor with elites at the expense of their peers.
90. Yves-Marie Berée, Fêtes et révolte: Des manifestations populaires du XVIIe au XVIIIe siècle, 83.
91. As with carnival itself, Bakhtin was playing a cat and mouse game with high Stalinism as
he was writing his study of Rabelais. It doesn’t take much in the way of inference to equate the
realm of official mendacity and dominated discourse with the Stalinist state and the carnivalesque
of Rabelais as an offstage negation and skepticism that will survive repression. But, again like
carnival, because Bakhtin’s text also has a perfectly innocent meaning, it has a chance of slipping
through. It is at least not obviously treasonous.
domination were absent. Compared to official speech, this realm of free speech was the closest approximation to a Socratic dialogue or, in terms of contemporary social theory, the “ideal speech situation” envisaged by Jürgen Habermas.93 Among the implicit operating assumptions that, Habermas argues, must lie behind any communicative act are that the speaker means what he says and that he speaks truly. Dominated discourse is, of necessity, distorted communication because power relations encourage “strategic” forms of manipulation that undermine genuine understanding.94

From our perspective, treating carnival speech as true speech or as approaching the ideal speech situation is too idealist a reading of social reality. So long as speech occurs in any social situation it is saturated with power relations; there is no single privileged vantage point from which the distance of a speech act from “true” speech can be measured. In brief, we all measure our words. What one can do, however, is to compare different speech situations for the relative light they shed on one another. Bakhtin is, in this sense, comparing the speech found where anonymity and a festive atmosphere evade certain everyday relationships of power and replace them with a different relationship of power. Social power in carnival may be less asymmetrical; but reciprocal power is still power.

The other difficulty of a view derived from Bakhtin or Habermas is that it misses the extent to which the speech characteristic of one realm of power is, in part, a product of the speech that is blocked or suppressed in another realm of power. Thus, the grotesquerie, profanity, ridicule, aggression, and character assassination of carnival make sense only in the context of the effect of power relations the rest of the year. The profoundness of the silences generated in one sphere of power may be proportional to the explosive speech in another sphere. Who can fail to recognize this linkage in the following statement about carnival by an Andalusian peasant? “We come alive. We cover our faces and no one recognizes us, and then, watch out! The sky’s the limit.”95 The anticipation of carnival and the pleasure derived from it are due largely to the fact that, in anonymity, one can say to one’s antagonists precisely what one has had to choke back all year. Great inequalities in status and power generate a rich hidden transcript. In a society of equals there would still be room for carnival for there would still be power relations, but one imagines that it would be less ferocious, and certainly the pleasures of carnival would not be so heavily concentrated in one segment of the society.

Accepting, for the moment, the place of suppressed speech and acting in carnival, we must still consider whether it ritually serves to displace and relieve social tensions and hence restore social harmony. This is a familiar variant of the safety-valve theory—the idea that once the people get the hidden transcript off their chest, they’ll find the routines of domination easier to return to. We must take this argument more seriously perhaps for the case of carnival than for the world-upside-down prints because of the symbolic subordination and institutionalization of carnival. By symbolic subordination, I mean that carnival is ritually timed to fall just before and to be replaced by Lent; Mardi Gras gives way to Ash Wednesday. Gluttony, carousing, and drinking are superseded by fasting, prayer, and abstinence. In most carnival rituals, as if to emphasize the ritual hierarchy, a figure representing the spirit of carnival is ritually killed by a figure representing Lent, almost as if to say, “Now that you’ve had your fun we shall return to the sober, pious life.” The institutionalization of carnival might also be taken to support the safety-valve theory. If carnival is disorder, it is a disorder within the rules, perhaps even a ritual lesson in the consequences and folly of violating the rules. The rules or conventions of carnival—including the rule that no one may remove another’s mask—are, rather like the Geneva Convention for armed conflict, what allow carnival to proceed. As Terry Eagleton, quoting Shakespeare’s Olivia, notes, “There is no slander in an allowed fool.”96

If issues of interpretation like this were resolved on the basis of a majority vote of scholars who had looked at the matter, the safety-valve theory would almost surely prevail.97 Most of them would agree with Roger Sales that the authorities “removed the stopper to stop the bottle being smashed altogether.”98 The partisans of carnival historically were not above making precisely this kind of appeal to their superiors. Witness this letter that circulated in 1444 in the Paris School of Theology arguing that the Feast of Fools be celebrated:

So that foolishness, which is our second nature and seems to be inherent in man might freely spend itself at least once a year. Wine barrels burst if from time to time we do not open them and let in some air. All of us men are


94. Habermas argues that strategic lying and deception are parasitic on “genuine” speech acts since the deception and lying work only if they’re mistakenly accepted as the truth by one’s interlocutor.

95. Gilmore, Aggression and Community, 16.

96. Walter Benjamin, Towards a Revolutionary Criticism, 148, quoted in Stallybrass and White, Politics and Poetics of Transgression, 13.

97. See, for example, Max Gluckman, Order and Rebellion in Tribal Africa; Victor Turner, The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure; and Roger Sales, English Literature in History, 1780–1830: Pastoral and Politics.

98. English Literature in History, 169.
barrels poorly put together, which would burst from the wine of wisdom, if this wine remains in a state of constant fermentation of piousness and fear of God. We must give it air in order not to let it spoil. **This is why we permit folly on certain days so that we may later return with greater zeal to the service of God.**\(^99\)

Using Mrs. Poyser’s hydraulic figure of speech to make their case, the authors manage nicely to combine both an appeal to the hegemonic value of carnival and an implicit threat about what might happen if their request is not granted.

The view that carnival is a mechanism of social control authorized by elites is not entirely wrong, but it is, I believe, seriously misleading. It risks confusing the intentions of elites with the results they are able to achieve. Here, as we shall see, the view ignores the actual social history of carnival, which bears directly on this issue. Setting aside social history for the moment, however, we may discern also an untenable essentialism embedded in this functionalist perspective. A complex social event such as carnival cannot be said to be simply this or that as if it had a given, genetically programmed, function. It makes far greater sense to see carnival as the ritual site of various forms of social conflict and symbolic manipulation, none of which can be said, prima facie, to prevail. Carnival, then, may be expected to vary with culture and historic circumstances and is likely to be serving many functions for its participants. This brings us to a further difficulty with the functionalist view: namely, that it ascribes a unique agency to elites. It is surely not accurate to proceed as if carnival were set up exclusively by dominant groups to allow subordinate groups to play at rebellion lest they resort to the real thing. The existence and the evolving form of carnival have been the outcome of social conflict, not the unilateral creation of elites. It would be just as plausible to view carnival as an ambiguous political victory wrested from elites by subordinate groups. Finally, one wonders what sort of psychological law lies behind the safety-valve theory. Why is it that a ritual modeling of revolt should necessarily diminish the likelihood of actual revolt? Why couldn’t it just as easily serve as a dress rehearsal or a provocation for actual defiance? A ritual feint at revolt is surely less dangerous than actual revolt, but what warrant have we for assuming it is a substitute, let alone a satisfactory one?

At this point it is instructive to turn to the actual struggles over carnival. If, in fact, the safety-valve theory guided elite conduct, one would expect elites to encourage carnival, especially when social tensions were running high. The opposite is more nearly the case. In any event, even if elites did believe in the safety-valve theory, they were never so confident as to assume that its opera-

tion was automatically assured. For much of its history the church and secular elites have seen carnival as a potential if not actual site of disorder and sedition that required constant surveillance. Rudwin has written at some length about the persistent efforts of church authorities in German-speaking Europe to prohibit or replace the carnival comedies (ludi) that mercilessly satirized them.\(^{100}\) In place of the burlesques of the mass and the pranks of Till Eulenspiegel, the church attempted to promote passion and mystery plays in direct competition. Carnivals in France that were originally permitted or even sanctioned by church officials and municipalities were later proscribed after they had been appropriated and turned to suspect purposes by the populace. Bakhtin, for example, notes that the popular societies formed to create farces, soties, and satires for carnival (for example, the Basochiens and the Enfants sans souci) were often “the object of prohibitions and repressions, the Basochiens being eventually suspended.”\(^{101}\)

Where it has survived, the twentieth-century carnival retains its social bite. One of the first pieces of legislation passed during the Spanish Civil War by General Francisco Franco’s government was an act outlawing carnival. For the remainder of the war, anyone caught in non-Republican-held areas wearing a mask was liable to harsh penalties, and carnival was much abated but not eliminated. Once martial law was lifted, however, “people in Fuenmajor would not give it up, and so they sang their insults from jail.” “No one could take away carnival from us, not the Pope, not Franco, not Jesus himself; they say in Fuenmajor.”\(^{102}\) As Franco understood, carnival and masks are always a potential threat. Rabelais, himself a Jesuit, after all, had to flee France for a time for writing in a carnivalesque vein, and his friend Etienne Dolet, who said much the same thing but disguised it less, was burned at the stake.

The possible conjunction between carnival and revolt is nowhere better illustrated than in Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie’s account of the bloody carnival of 1580 in the town of Romans, to the southeast of Lyons.\(^{103}\) A recent history of class and religious strife fed into the carnival spirit; Romans had had its own St. Bartholomew’s Day massacre in 1572. A newly wealthy urban patriciate

---
100. *The Origin of the German Carnival Comedy,* Pre-Reformation authorities also objected to the pagan fertility rites embedded in carnival, while post-Reformation authorities in Protestant areas associated carnival with Roman paganism. Both thought it potentially subversive of public order. In municipalities where the burghers took over carnival it might contain satires of the peasantry.
101. *Rabelais and His World,* 97. For a much later attempt in England to prohibit fairs, which were sites for the carnivalesque and disorder, see R. W. Malcolmson, *Popular Recreations in English Society, 1700–1850.*
103. *Carnival in Romans.*
was buying land from ruined peasants and acquiring titles that exempted them from taxes, with the result that the tax burden on the remaining smallholders and artisans was greatly increased. In this context, Ladurie explains, carnival became, in Romans, a site of conflict between an upper crust of merchants, landowners, and bourgeois patricians against a "small property-owning sector in the middle ranges of common craftsmen." In the countryside, it became a struggle between peasants and nobles.

The first sign of trouble was the failure of carnival to flow in the ritual channel designated for it by the town's elite. Since various elements of the carnival festivities were organized by neighborhood and by craft, fiscal and class tensions coincided to some extent with carnival societies. The craftsmen and tradesmen, for example, refused to participate in the initial parade, in which the order of march represented a precise marking of relative status. Instead they held their own parades in their quarters. As Jean Bodin had warned, "[A] procession of all the ranks and all the professions carries the risk ... of conflicts of priority and the possibility of popular revolts. Let us not exceed, ... except in case of dire need of ceremonies of this kind." Each of three so-called Animal Kingdoms, those of the hare (Huguenot), the Capon (Leaguers or rebels), and the Partridge (Catholics and patriciate), was entitled to a day when their ritual kingdoms were enacted. In this case, however, the Capon procession was particularly threatening. The dancers proclaimed that the rich had grown wealthy at the expense of the poor and demanded restitution via door-to-door collections of food and cash, which were traditional but in this case openly menacing. When time came, ritually speaking, for the Capon kingdom to give way to the Partridge kingdom, it defiantly continued, thereby making something of a symbolic declaration of war. In this ritual defiance the authorities read an apocalyptic omen: "The poor want to take all our earthly goods and our women, too; they want to kill us, perhaps even eat our flesh." Fearing not just a figurative but a literal world upside down, the elite moved first, assassinating league leader Paumier and touching off a small civil war that took thirty lives in Romans and more than one thousand in the surrounding countryside.

However much the aristocrats and property owners of Romans may have wished to orchestrate carnival into a ritual reaffirmation of existing hierarchies, they failed. Like any ritual site, it could be infused with the signs, symbols, and meanings brought to it by its least advantaged participants as well. It might symbolize the folly of disorder or it might, if appropriated from below, break out of its ritual straightjacket to symbolize oppression and defiance. What is striking historically about carnival is not how it contributed to the maintenance of existing hierarchies, but how frequently it was the scene of open social conflict. As Burke summarizes his own survey, "At all events, between 1500 and 1800 rituals of revolt did coexist with serious questioning of the social, political, and religious order, and the one sometimes turned into the other. Protest was expressed in ritual forms, but the ritual was not always sufficient to contain the protest. The wine barrel sometimes blew its top."

In 1861, when the czar decided on the abolition of serfdom, the ukase was signed in the midst of carnival week. Fearing "the orgies of villagers so frequent during that week would degenerate into an insurrection," officials delayed the actual proclamation for another two weeks so that the news might have a less incendiary impact.

I do not mean to imply that carnival or rituals of reversal cause revolt; they most certainly do not. The point is rather about the relation between symbolism and disguise. Carnival, in its ritual structure and anonymity, gives a privileged place to normally suppressed speech and aggression. It was, in many societies, virtually the only time during the year when the lower classes were permitted to assemble in unprecedented numbers behind masks and make threatening gestures toward those who ruled in daily life. Given this unique opportunity and the world-upside-down symbolism associated with carnival, it is hardly surprising that it would frequently spill over its ritual banks into violent conflict. And if one were, in fact, planning a rebellion or protest, the legitimate cover of anonymous assembly provided by carnival might suggest itself as a likely venue. The authorized element of carnival, rather like the relatively innocent world-upside-down prints of flying fish, furnished a setting in which it was relatively safe to insert less-than-innocuous messages. This is why, I think, that it is virtually impossible to dissociate the carnivalesque from politics until quite recently. It is why actual rebels mimic carnival—they dress as women or mask themselves when breaking machinery or making political demands; their threats use the figures and symbolism of carnival; they extort cash and employment concessions in the manner of crowds expecting gifts during carnival; they use the ritual planning

104. Ibid., 19.
105. Quoted in ibid., 201.
106. The equations with strata and religious confession are crude but will suffice for our purposes here.
107. Ibid., 163.
108. Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe, 203.
109. Ibid., chap. 8.
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

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.

110. Zolberg, "Moments of Madness."
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.”

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 underlie an essential, if brief, equality among all members of a society and because they illustrate, if only ritualistically, the dangers of disorder and anarchy, their function is to emphasize the necessity of institutionalized order. For Ranajit Guha the order-serving effects of rituals of reversal lie precisely in the fact that they are authorized and prescribed from above. 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.

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.
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 allow these to be simulated at regular calendric intervals,” 30, emphasis added.
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. 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 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. 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?

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

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.

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. 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 grumbling 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 mealing, 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 hatred 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: “[T]o 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 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 pasture, 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 outlaw as applied to those who continued to exercise these now-proscribed rights has a

\(^9\) 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.


\(^12\) 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.”

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.”

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 forests day after day exercising those rights as best they could. There is an important dialectic here between the hidden transcript and practical resistance. 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 mere 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

16. Ibid., 124.
17. Ibid., 162.
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." 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 . . . dominants 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 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
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 gamekeepers 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 several 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 he is too enraged, the rents too high, or his pride too insulted). These acts will typically have been met with quick severe sanctions (e.g., beatings, jailings, but 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 established 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, pasturage, 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.”

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 gamekeepers 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.

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

nineteenth-century Germany was, as Marx noted in some early articles in the Rheinische Zeitung, a form of class struggle. 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, when 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. 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. 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 tithe 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

24. Ibid., 123.
25. Ibid., 190.
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.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{30}

Ranajit Guha has argued convincingly that open acts of desacralization and disrespect are often the first sign of actual rebellion.\textsuperscript{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-

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 priories from the crypts of cathedrals, which were then dumped unceremoniously on the front steps.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{33}

\textsuperscript{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.\textit{Peasant Revolution, Civil War: The Volga Countryside in Revolution}, chap. 3.

\textsuperscript{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.

\textsuperscript{31} \textit{Elementary Forms of Peasant Insurgency}, chap. 2.

\textsuperscript{32} Bruce Lincoln, “Revolutionary Exhumations in Spain, July 1936.”

\textsuperscript{33} This, I believe, is the missing element in the theories of legitimation to be found in John Gaventa’s otherwise perceptive book, \textit{Power and Powerlessness}, esp. chap. 1. See also Lukes, \textit{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 infra politics (see accompanying table). For contemporary liberal democracies in the West, an exclusive concern for open political

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Material Domination</th>
<th>Status Domination</th>
<th>Ideological Domination</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Practices of Domination</td>
<td>appropriation of grain, taxes, labor, etc.</td>
<td>humiliation, dis-privilege, insults, assaults on dignity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forms of Public Declared Resistant</td>
<td>petitions, demonstrations, boycotts, strikes, land invasions, and open revolts</td>
<td>public assertion of worth by gesture, dress, speech, and/or open desecration of status symbols of the dominant</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Forms of Disguised, low profile, Undisclosed resistance, INFRA-POLITICS

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 subcultures e.g., millennial religions, slave “push-arbor,” 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 infra politics, is the silent partner of a loud form of public resistance. Thus, piecemeal squatting is the infra political 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 infra political 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 infra political equivalents of public, radical, counterideologies: both are aimed at negating the public symbolism of ideological domination. Infra politics, then, is essentially the strategic form that the resistance of subjects must assume under conditions of great peril.

The strategic imperatives of infra politics 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-
ually 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 large 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, institutionalized 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.