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## **Review of 'Domination and the Arts of Resistance' by James C. Scott**

**Abdelaali Khalifa <sup>1</sup> and Dr. Mohamed Khales**<sup>1</sup> Sultan Moulay Slimane University, Beni Mellal, Morocco  
abdelaalikhaliifa07@gmail.com**Supervised by Dr. Mohamed Khales**

### **ABSTRACT**

In his book "Domination and the Arts of Resistance," James C. Scott sought to construct a theoretical framework for understanding how the weak people resist various forms of domination, subordination, and subjugation directed against them. His ideas primarily focused on examining and analyzing the hidden and implicit dimensions of resistance in the discourses and behaviors of subordinate groups, relying on ethnographic data drawn from specific communities in Southeast Asia.

**Key words :** the weak people, domination, public transcript, hidden transcript, infra-politics.

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

James Scott\* (1936–2024) was an American thinker and academic. He earned a bachelor's degree from Williams College, followed by completing his graduate studies to obtain both a master's and a doctoral degree from Yale University. Scott served as a lecturer at the University of Wisconsin–Madison until 1976, before concluding his professional career as a professor of political science at Yale University.

James Scott's work primarily focused on studying and observing the hidden and implicit aspects of resistance discourses and behaviors among subjugated groups. Drawing on a set of ethnographic data from certain Southeast Asian communities, Scott sought to uncover how peasants, the poor, workers, slaves, and marginalized individuals resist forms of authoritarianism by adopting everyday strategies aimed at escaping the authoritarianism of those in power.

The majority of James Scott's work has focused on studying Southeast Asian societies, relying on the framework of anarchist anthropology. Through this approach, he aimed to uncover the structures that reflect these societies' rejection of authority. The most prominent of Scott's works can be summarized as follows: *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia* (1976); *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (1985); *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (1998); *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (2009); *Two Cheers for Anarchism: Six Easy Pieces on Autonomy, Dignity, and Meaningful Work and Play* (2012); *Against the Grain: A Deep History of the Earliest States* (2017); *In Praise of Floods: The Untamed River and the Life It Brings* (2025\*).

\* I wrote this paper in dedication to the memory of James Scott, who passed away on July 19, 2024.

\* his book was published posthumously, after the death of James Scott.

## 2. The Dialectics of Public and Hidden Transcripts

J. Scott has formulated a set of operational concepts aimed at uncovering the forms of everyday resistance employed by the weak in their interactions with those in power. By doing so, he transcends a range of traditional theoretical concepts, particularly Marxist ones, arguing that they are detached from reality and steeped in abstraction.

Among the key concepts formulated by Scott at this level is the notion of the "public transcript," which he defines as a form of submission displayed by subordinates in the presence of those in power. It refers to the consciously and overtly produced discourse by the weak in the presence of authority figures, characterized as a covert discourse that outwardly proclaims values of submission and surrender while concealing the genuine attitudes and convictions held by subordinates regarding powerholders. Acts such as greetings, praise, smiles, reverence, and demonstrations of coerced politeness, among others, are merely tactical choices and pretensions deliberately adopted by the weak to acknowledge the prevailing power dynamics (Massoumi & Morgan, 2024, p. 1343).

Since the weak people employ disguise as a means to understand the intentions of those in power, the latter, in turn, resort to adopting various mechanisms of surveillance to uncover what lies behind the masks of the subordinates. Consequently, the public transcript, in this context, emerges as the result of an implicit collusion between the two parties. It is shaped by the dialectics of disguise and surveillance that characterize the relationship between the powerful and the weak.

J. Scott argues that while the weak have their own reasons for wearing a mask in the presence of those in power, the powerful also have compelling reasons that drive them to adopt a mask in the presence of their subordinates (Scott, 1990, p. 10). This is because the public transcript of both parties is based on cautious behaviors that are governed by strategic significance. These behaviors manifest themselves only in a veiled, disguised, and cunning manner. This dynamic interaction reveals systematic forms of domination and submission, demonstrating that the intelligence of members of dominant groups is no less sharp than that of the subordinates.

In this context, J. Scott introduces the concept of the "hidden transcript" as a reference to a type of discourse that escapes the direct surveillance exercised by those in power. It is a form of deviation in the relationship between the weak and the powerful as manifested in the public transcript, as it is explicit, free from all forms of camouflage, and violates the usual modes of interaction within the public sphere. It functions as a quiet strategy or a form of silent resistance against authority, driven by anger and frustration. It is produced within intimate, private spaces, as the weak can only generate this type of discourse when they feel a sense of relative security within

their unsupervised environments, and in the presence of those who share the same circumstances.

From this perspective, J. Scott argues that it is possible, at a certain moment—due to specific conditions—that the hidden transcript can be revealed within the public sphere of interaction, where all forms of camouflage and deception disappear, replaced by a form of open defiance and confrontation. This is because the necessity of wearing a mask in the presence of authority generates an opposing pressure that cannot be suppressed indefinitely (Scott, 1990, p. 9). According to J. Scott, the revelation of the hidden intentions or hidden transcript is not spontaneous or naive; its spontaneity lies only in the timing of its declarations and intensity, not in its content.

The common conditions of this social class and the strength of social ties among its members are what grant the weak the ability to turn their hidden Transcript into public Transcript, which, in turn, affects the existing power relations within society. According to James Scott, the hidden Transcript produced by the weak are characterized by three main features: first, the hidden transcript is often linked to a specific social position and a particular set of performers. It is a discourse formulated within a narrow circle of the audience, excluding others.

This is precisely where the value and power of this type of discourse lie. Second, this type of discourse is not only composed of what is uttered and declared but is also associated with a series of actual practices such as cheating, theft, tax evasion, and so on. For the ruling elites, these practices may include acquiring undeclared privileges, such as using bribery, manipulating land ownership, and so on. What is noteworthy at this level is that the hidden practices of both parties contrast with their public practices. Third, the potential boundaries between public and hidden transcripts form an arena of a constant struggle between the ruler and the ruled. This ongoing and unresolved struggle creates a vital space for the emergence of new patterns of conflict (Scott, 1990, p. 5-6).

If subordinate groups produce a series of hidden transcripts within their private and intimate spaces, the dominant groups follow a similar approach, as they also work to produce a set of discourses and practices that deviate from what is visible in the public sphere. Therefore, understanding the relations of domination and the forms of resistance created by the weak requires, at its core, an analysis of the relationship between the hidden transcript produced by the subordinates and that produced by the dominant groups, alongside the public transcript that defines the power relations between them.

The investigation of the possible relationships between public and hidden transcripts, according to Scott, exhibits four patterns of resistance predominant among subordinate groups:

- A- The first pattern is primarily based on praising the self-image of the ruling elites, where the weak can express their demands within the existing ideological framework that shows no opposing intentions (this is the safest pattern for subordinate groups).
- B- The second pattern refers to the hidden transcript itself, where the subordinates gather outside the public stage, away from the surveillance of those in power, to form an opposing culture that challenges the official culture. It is important to note that this is only possible in cases where a sense of security for the weak is achieved.
- C- The third pattern occupies a strategic position between the two previous patterns, allowing the subordinate groups to adopt a policy of disguise and camouflage, relying on rumors, gossip, scandals, stories, proverbs, songs, rituals, and implicit discourses, to resist the powerful. These practices later become an essential part of the culture of the subordinate groups.
- D- The fourth pattern involves removing the potential boundaries between public and hidden transcripts by openly declaring the hidden intentions, despite the fact that this act of challenge often leads to a strong repressive campaign, prompting the weak to produce even bolder actions and discourses (Scott, 1990, p. 18-19).

In general, the most important conclusion that can be drawn from this level of analysis is that the public transcript represents a reality that the ruling elites attempt to impose, where subordinate groups are subjected to perform and embody a set of roles infused with values of submission and surrender, in order to maintain the existing relations of domination. However, what is noteworthy in this regard is that subordinate groups perform these roles in a tactical manner that reflects their awareness of the balance of power. In other words, their submission in the public sphere is not spontaneous or automatic, but rather a form of veiled and concealed resistance.

### **3. Infra-politics and the Possibility of Resistance to Authoritarianism**

Many of the acts and practices of resistance adopted by subordinate groups fall under what James Scott calls "infra-politics," which refers, in its simplest sense, to a set of hidden forms of resistance that do not explicitly reveal their nature (Alvarez, 2012, p. 20). It consists of a series of disguised and covert actions employed by subordinate groups in their interactions with those in power. It is a form of quiet and invisible political struggle that avoids the direct confrontation with those in power (such as demonstrations, mass protests, uprisings, etc.). It is a tactical choice stemming from the subordinate groups' awareness of the nature of the existing power relations within society.

The relationship between the ruled and the ruling elites is based on both material and symbolic struggle, in which each party seeks to exploit the weaknesses of the other and expand the circle of gains that can result from this type of resistance. Infra-politics, with its symbolic and material resistance, aims to create a series of practical struggles that attempt to prevent relations of exploitation and domination, or at least alleviate their intensity.

According to James Scott, disguised and hidden forms of resistance can sometimes provide a solid foundation for the emergence of a series of public acts of resistance, offering an opportunity to reveal the hidden transcript and transform it into an open rejection of domination. Thus, infra-politics, in this sense, is a conscious political choice that enables subordinate groups to resist relations of domination, particularly in the context of the pervasive pattern of surveillance that characterizes public political life.

From this perspective, infra-politics is considered a highly pragmatic politics, as it relies on a sustained and secure pressure to expand the boundaries of what is permissible, whether in terms of discourse or practice. What can be observed in this regard is that infra-politics is directly connected to the public transcript and primarily manifests on the public stage; that is, in the realm of public interaction as a space for revealing power relations. However, its production occurs in private and intimate spaces, outside the public stage.

Based on this, James Scott emphasizes that understanding the dynamics of infra-politics adopted by subordinate groups allows us to comprehend the practical forms of resistance aimed at escaping the authoritarianism of those in power, through the production of a subculture that establishes a new form of social control relations.

In general, the strength of infra-politics lies in its ability to turn relations of domination into relations of resistance which are based on sustained attempts to resist. According to Scott, the ability of the ruled to resist depends on their capacity to consolidate and cooperate, which manifests in at least three key levels: the first one is the visual impact that expresses collective power, which has an effect on both the subordinates and their opponents. The second one is concerned with how this cooperation provides individuals with a sense of disguise, reducing the likelihood of personal identification and accountability, since the discourse emanates from the group as a whole. The third level is that the declaration of the so-called hidden transcript allows the weak people to express themselves, thereby compensating for their misery and suffering (Scott, 1990, p. 66).

#### **4. Sites and Spaces of Resistance: The Dialectic of Freedom and Surveillance**

According to James Scott, resistance discourses and behaviors can only occur if subordinate groups are able to create "social spaces" away from the surveillance and control of those in power. These spaces are essential for enabling the weak to produce their hidden transcripts and form a set of infra-policies that allow them to resist the manifestations of domination and hegemony that shape their daily reality.

From this perspective, social spaces refer to those areas in which the hidden transcripts grow and develop, that is, those places where the unspoken response, suppressed anger, and repressed tongues, caused by the pervasive relations of control, find their strong and free expression (Scott, 1990, p. 120). These are domains that make the exchange and the sharing of the hidden transcripts among the weak less risky and they are performed under the realization of two conditions:

- A- The first condition is that the hidden transcript finds its explicit expression in an unsupervised social space, where surveillance and control are less able to reach.
- B- The second condition is that this unsupervised social environment must be entirely composed of trusted individuals who share the same situation and hold the same stances toward the dominant authority.

According to James Scott, the first condition is what allows the weak to speak freely with one another, while the second ensures that they have something to discuss within the context of their shared subjugation (Scott, 1990, p. 120).

Based on this, it can be argued that socially autonomous spaces serve as fertile ground for the formation of a series of resistance patterns and actions, enabling the weak to exert pressure on the ruling elites in a sustained and secure manner. According to Scott, the weak can, through the process of consolidation and cooperation, transform a place that was originally unsafe into a safe one by removing it from the realm of surveillance. In this context, he acknowledges that creating this safe space may not require any physical distance between the ruled and the rulers, considering the linguistic codes, dialects, and bodily expressions used by the ruled. These expressions are perceived by those in power as meaningless, while they carry profound semantic significance for the weak.

In general, Scott argues that the history of political struggle is essentially a history of attempts to control public spaces and the social spaces where discourse prevails. However, it should be noted at this level that the formulation of hidden transcripts is not only related to the creation of spaces away from surveillance, but also to the nature of the active human forces that shape these spaces, which are often marginal, much like the margins of the places where they gather.

The shared reality and destiny is what drives the subordinated groups to create a unified subculture with its own symbols and standards, enabling them to establish a resistant discourse that is ambiguous and encrypted. However, the ruling groups, in turn, work to create an elitist culture that is difficult to penetrate from below, leading to two conflicting cultures, both characterized by ambiguity. Nevertheless, according to Scott, the subordinated groups must find a way to convey their message in some form, by exploiting the gaps allowed by the power structure or those that the authority is unable to prevent, in order to form a public political life. Even if this life is weak and ambiguous, it exists within a political system that, in principle, forbids such a public life unless it is directed and controlled from above.

The social spaces that provide subordinated groups with the opportunity to express themselves safely and freely are very limited. Therefore, Scott argues that the smaller and more intimate the subordinated group, the safer and more effective their ability to express themselves freely. The more the ruling groups are able to prevent the ruled from gathering away from their surveillance, the narrower the scope of the hidden transcript becomes, rendering it meaningless.

#### **5. Symbolic Inversion and Carnival as Mechanisms for Reshaping Power Relations**

"Symbolic inversion" represents an important form of expression adopted by subordinated groups with the aim of overturning social hierarchies, where the powerful are placed in a position of weakness and the weak in a position of power. It is an ancient European tradition that subordinated groups used to express their rejection of the prevailing relations of dominance in society, by turning power relations "upside down."

This tradition underwent significant development during the 16th century due to the spread of printing, which facilitated the lower classes' ability to redraw a world turned upside down as an expression of their rejection of prevailing power relations. For example, they depicted mice eating cats, children slapping parents, rabbits chasing hunters, and the poor helping the rich, etc., as an attempt to overturn the hierarchical relationships that characterize everyday life. In this context, Scott argues that this tradition can serve a functional purpose, acting as a safety valve (Marche, 2012, p. 6). The ruling groups might create a collective outlet that allows the subordinated groups to release their grievances, thus avoiding any danger that could threaten the existing social order. However, this does not negate the possibility that this tradition could be a primary source of underground resistance, through which subordinated groups attempt to break free from the grip of existing dominance relations, making it a tradition carrying conscious and well-considered resistance practices (Scott, 2012, p. 116).

Based on this, James Scott presents the "Carnival" as an institutional form of political disguise for subordinated groups. This occasion, due to its large audience, expands the margin of freedom and provides an opportunity for the free and public expression of feelings and emotions through a series of unregulated rituals and practices. The festive atmosphere that characterizes the carnival allows the weak to replace everyday power relations with new and different forms of power relations, both in terms of nature and form, as the anonymity provided by the carnival enables the subordinated to openly and publicly express their rejection of the prevailing dominance relations.

From this perspective, J. Scott argues that viewing the carnival as a mechanism of social control by the ruling elites remains a plausible notion. However, in his view, it is more likely that the carnival represents an opportunity that subordinated groups have consciously and intentionally seized from the ruling groups to resist power relations.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The "everyday resistance" model, developed by James Scott, helps uncover the complexity of power relations, in general, and understand the behaviors of marginalized and excluded groups, in particular. It has granted agency to groups that, until recently, were described as passive, submissive, and oppressed. This theoretical model, according to Asef Bayat, enables us to recognize that there is no uniform form of struggle, that organized collective actions are not feasible everywhere, and that the local must be acknowledged as an important site of struggle. Furthermore, organized protest is not preferable in contexts dominated by repression (Bayat, 2000, p. 540).

However, this model raises several theoretical issues, particularly regarding the definition it assigns to the concept of resistance itself, which Scott defines as: "any act(s) by member(s) of a subordinate class that is or are intended either to mitigate or deny claims (for example, rents, taxes, prestige) made on that class by superordinate classes (for example, landlords, large farmers, the state) or to advance its own claims (for example, work, land, charity, respect) vis-a-vis these superordinate classes" (Scott, 1985, p. 290). The generalization Scott adopts through the use of the term "any act" poses significant difficulty in distinguishing between large-scale, organized collective resistance and limited, individual acts. It is illogical to place poetry recited in secrecy, no matter how rebellious its tone, on the same level of importance as armed struggle (Bayat, 2000, p. 542). Moreover, this theoretical model fails to clearly differentiate between the awareness of oppression and acts of resistance directed against it, as the awareness of power relations does not necessarily translate into practical resistance.

Scott adopts Michel Foucault's conception of power, which views power as dispersed throughout society and argues that it cannot be concentrated in the hands of a particular individual or institution. Power is not a static property held by an individual or collective subject, but rather a product of strategies in the struggle between forces. However, Scott overlooks that, despite its dispersion, power is distributed unequally, as it tends to be more concentrated in certain spaces compared to others. Therefore, special attention must be given to the power of the state when studying the activity of subordinate groups (Bayat, 2000, p. 544).

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