

Title—Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts

Author—James C. Scott

Year—1990

Categories: Subaltern, Colonialism, Resistance, Theory

Place: The World

Time: 1500-Present

Argument Synopsis:

Scott's book is a more global scoped follow up to his earlier book *Weapons of the Weak* and is a study of power relations and discourse. Scott demonstrates how the powerless are often obliged to adopt a defensive posture of subservience, deference, and humility in the presence of the powerful, while the powerful had a need to enhance their public persona in order to maintain their mastery. His book is part of the effort to provide a language in terms of which to understand underclass politics. Scott identifies the distinction between public transcripts, or the open interaction between subordinates and those who dominate, and hidden transcripts, or discourse that takes place offstage, beyond the direct observation of powerholders. The public transcript represents how the dominant group wishes things to appear but is an appearance in which subordinates endorse their subordination. The hidden transcript is essentially a rich oral tradition, speeches, gestures, rituals, songs, etc. that contradict what is in the official public transcript. Scott suggests how we might interpret rumors, gossip, folktales, songs, gestures and jokes as vehicles that insinuate a critique of power. He details the strategies by which subgroups have managed to disguise their resistance to disguise their resistance and place it into the public transcript.

Scott's book is about the experience of domination and indignity that power relations impose on the powerless. He asserts that all forms of domination are means of extracting labor, goods and services. Scott's concept of the subordinate is similar to that of the subaltern, but he attempts to go further in disentangling the main components of domination—material appropriation, rituals of hierarchy, punishment and humiliation, and ideological justification. Unlike *Weapons of the Weak* with its narrow focus on the Malay, Scott uses a global scale for his analysis in this book. He highlights three case studies of domination: slavery in the United States, serfdom in Russia, and caste subordination. These cases affirm his premise that every subordinate group creates, out of its ordeal, a hidden transcript that represents a critique of power spoken behind the back of the dominant. He highlights subordinate groups' ability to imagine a counterfactual order, which he posits is proof of a dissenting reflex.

Scott argues that what is taken as hegemony of dominant group ideas is in fact only an uncritical observation of the performance of the public transcript. He claims that the dominated are perfectly capable of formulating their own criticisms of the social relations in which they find themselves. He puts forth the notion that there is no solid wall between dominant and subordinate transcripts but rather a frontier of constant struggle that constitutes the everydayness of resistance and the symbolic social space in which resistance germinates.

Key Themes and Concepts:

- Social science has wrongly focused on the formal or public relations between the powerful and the weak—this approach is misleading and incomplete
- Public transcript categorized as a stylized public performance through which the dominated adopt the forms of deference and respect for the powerful that are needed to avoid punishment
- Four varieties of subordinate discourse: flattery of the elite, offstage discourse, disguise and double meaning, and the rupture of the playing field