Afterword

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Judging from these inventive and sharply observed studies of protest and resistance, the concept “infrapolitics” seems to be “good-to-think-with.” Having invented the term to describe a genre of politics for which there seemed to be no appropriate term and, at the same time, hesitant to introduce another neologism into a social science crawling with them, I am naturally pleased that the authors of the studies in this volume have found the term useful. I should begin my brief afterword by making it clear that I hold no patent on the term “infrapolitics.” Once a new term is launched, it sets out on an independent voyage of its own, free to choose its own traveling companions as it makes its way in the world. That is to say, I could not “police” the exotic uses of the term “infrapolitics” if I wanted to, and I definitely do not want to.

I might, however, recall for readers less familiar with my Weapons of the Weak: Everyday forms of Peasant Resistance (Yale UP, 1985) and Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts (Yale UP, 1990) in which the term was introduced, the purposes the term “infrapolitics” was originally intended to serve. In the course of ethnographic fieldwork in a Malaysian rice-growing village, I observed a high degree of tension and conflict between rich and poor. The key event generating agrarian conflict was the introduction, by landowners, of combine-harvesting machines. The machines liquidated the jobs of cutting, bundling (women’s work), and hand threshing (men’s work); it allowed landowners to farm more of their own land than before, thus displacing tenant farmers, and it eliminated gleaning by the poorest. And yet, there was no overt conflict: no marches, no petitions, no riots, no political manifestos, no public rallies. Malaysia was, at that time, an autocracy barely concealed beneath a thin façade of electoral brocade. No direct or open opposition would have been tolerated, nor were ordinary peasants under any illusion that their complaints would be heard, singly or collectively, let alone remedied. Politics was, as it had always been until then, a distant and dangerous game reserved for elites and townsmen.
Denied the widely recognized rights of citizenship secured by the French Revolution and later protected by the rule of law, politics took a different form. Widespread character assassination, petty theft, social boycotting of elite feasts, gossip and rumor, vague threats, and small acts of sabotage were the small coin of conflict and class struggle. Had the suffering approached starvation, I have little doubt that the poor villagers would have taken more desperate measures.

As I came to understand and chronicle this subterranean world of political conflict which left scarcely a trace in the public record, I realized not only that this was a genre of politics but that it was the prevailing genre of day-to-day politics for most of the world’s disenfranchised, for all those living in autocratic settings, for the peasantry, and for those living as subordinates in patriarchal families. It was, as it were, a politics that “dare not speak its name,” a diagonal politics, a careful and evasive politics that avoided dangerous risks, a politics quite in keeping with the reputation of the peasantry for “cunning.”

I came to realize as well that such politics was, though made up of thousands of small acts, potentially of enormous aggregate consequence in the world. Three brief examples may suffice.

In my Malaysian village, the villagers had collectively evaded the zakat, or Islamic tax of 10% of their harvest, ever since it came to be seen as illegitimate, because it was no longer voluntary and because the proceeds were sent away to the state capital rather than distributed in the village. They falsely under-declared the amount of land they farmed as well as their yields and then actually paid only a small fraction of what even their false declarations would require. As their evasion went unpunished, it grew. Actually, a handful of prosecutions led the peasantry to believe, it turned out correctly, that if even the largest landowners paid something (however small) the authorities would not come after them for fear of raising a storm. In the course of a dozen years the zakat had been nullified. And yet there had not been a single public protest, demonstration, or petition, let alone a riot. A substantial tax had been repealed de facto by massive, quiet, undeclared non-compliance.

A second example is that of poaching. For two centuries, from 1650 to 1850, poaching—of wood, fodder, rabbits, fish, and other game—had been the most popular crime in England. By popular, I mean both most common and most beloved among the lower classes. We know from many other sources that the rural peasants and agricultural laborers never considered the claim by gentry, aristocrats, and the crown to ownership over unimproved forests and wastelands to be legitimate. From a longue durée perspective one might say that a pitched class war over property rights to common lands was fought day in and day out for two hundred years throughout much of England. Again, this class war made no headlines; there were no marches to Parliament, no public social movements defending peasant rights, few petitions, and no riots.
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We know, in part through the inability of game-keepers and woodwardens to get local witnesses to testify against their neighbors, that poaching, far from being thought a crime, was considered the exercise of an ancient right by the rural poor. Here, then, was perhaps the last major struggle over land, the agrarian means of production in England, and it was fought below the radar of what normally counts as politics.

Desertion from the army, to be distinguished from open mutiny, is perhaps the most historically significant form of infrapolitics. It has probably been more responsible for the fates of armies and nations than the strategy and tactics of generals. To cite but one example of many, the defeat of the Confederacy in the US Civil War was determined far more by the mass desertion of non-slave holding hill-whites than by any other factor, unless it was the foot-dragging and defection of the slave population during the conflict—itself a form of infrapolitics. Here again, we know that both poor whites and black slaves had moral objections to the Confederacy’s cause, but the form that opposition took was not open rebellion or mutiny but the safer course of desertion and flight.

The essays in this volume offer us a bracing opportunity to explore the frontiers of what might be called “infrapolitics.” As I insisted at the beginning, it is not my place to patrol the frontiers of “infrapolitics” and decide what belongs under that heading or not. What the reading of these essays has provoked, however, and some thoughts about the interesting distinctions we might make between forms of resistance and protest.

One such distinction concerns the question of anonymity. When it is impossible to conceal who precisely is talking, resistance must often be muffled and indirect, like the inarticulate mumbling and grumbling of a subordinate who fears to venture a clear dissent. But, when the resister can hide behind anonymity, the voice can be clear and bold. That is, when the messenger is known the message is likely to be hedged; when the messenger is concealed, the message may be sharp. Such seems to be the case in the study of protest graffiti and of guerilla gardening. Guerilla gardeners, much like the Diggers of the English Civil War, who reclaimed the village commons by digging it up and planting crops, are taking back urban space from the modern-day enclosers who seize the city’s real estate for automobiles and corporations. At the very least, they create brief utopian moments illustrating what a differently conceived city might be like. That they often strike anonymously and often by night shields them from the full force of their powerful enemies. Graffiti, which as Guillaume Marche reminds us goes back at least to Pompeii and Herculaneum, are both a ubiquitous and forceful example of “voice” when most other avenues of expression are blocked. Like guerilla gardening, graffiti artists typically work at night, like the famous Banksy. One might hazard that if daylight is the temporal locus classicus of official politics, then nighttime is the
temporal *locus classicus* of infrapolitics and anonymity. The author of graffiti being invisible, the prose, or invective, can, as it were, shout at the top of its lungs. As Rabelais and his literary successor Bakhtin understood, anonymity in the form of masks, carnival burlesques, pen-names, have been the channel for venting socially or politically disapproved views as well as pure gossip and slander. It is worth noting in this connection that poaching and desertion also depend on the nameless anonymity of those who resort to it. Even large crowds and mobs provide their individual participants with a measure of anonymity that perhaps accentuates their bravado. Is anonymity so common in forms of protest in autocratic settings that we might even say it is the characteristic “voice” of infrapolitics? Does the contemporary proliferation of electronic media and cyber communities represent, in this sense, a vast new terrain of anonymous individual and collective action?

“Taqwacores” and the “Church Ladies” are, on the other hand, a different kettle of fish altogether! These “in-your-face,” cultural affronts to conventional values, hilariously playful and, at the same time, deadly serious are not anonymous at all and yet they represent a fairly comprehensive critique of official discourse. Rather like burlesques of the Christian Mass at the core of early Carnival, they represent a world-upside-down form of critique. One might well claim that, as such, they represent the most subversive variant of cultural opposition. They do not so much debate conventional categories as mock and ridicule them by a kind of profanation. They are examples of the principle that every high, sacred cultural form creates the cultural opening for a “black mass” that turns those sacred forms upside down. When the “Chicago Seven” were tried in connection with the demonstrations at the Democratic National Convention of 1968, Rennie Davis, far from entering a plea of “not-guilty” sat cross-legged on the defense table chanting “Oom, Oom.” This had a larger cultural impact than an impassioned defense would have. It profaned the court by studiously refusing to take its proceedings seriously.

At first sight, such open cultural confrontations, by their very ostentatiousness, seem not to resemble the disguise that characterizes most infrapolitics. But perhaps I am wrong! Perhaps there is another form of disguise at work here that throws me off quite as much as it eludes the objects of their ridicule. The sort of cultural dynamite they detonate seems, to most elites and states, to be, however irreverent, so outside the bounds of normal opposition that it appears harmless, antic, apolitical, and, hence, not really threatening. By subverting the official discourse from an angle where elites have not traditionally expected danger to arise and to which they are unprepared to respond, the subversives achieve a sort of immunity. And, somewhat more speculatively, these deeply subversive moves repeated again and again, over time, much as desertion can eventually break an army, have the effect of seriously eroding the cultural edifice sustaining the moral order of a deeply
inegalitarian society. Each profanation, though not itself decisive, much like the repeated jabs of the picadors’ lances, may in the end weaken the official moral order until a tipping point is reached. Benjamin Shepard of the “Church Ladies” seems to me an astute social theorist when he asserts: “...when you are faced with an absurd situation, sometimes an absurd response is an effective way of undermining the power of those who are opposing you” and when he notes that “the street is always two steps ahead of theory.”

Anti-sweatshop mobilization as infrapolitics is, in my view, a somewhat harder case to make, although it is made carefully and convincingly by Jean-Baptiste Velut. The logic of his argument is that United Students Against Sweatshops may be likened to infrapolitics by virtue of the fact that they avoided lobbying for state regulation in favor of what he calls market-based consumer activism, holding firms accountable by boycotts, publicity, student mobilization, worker mobilization, and monitoring. Of the movements under discussion in this volume, the anti-sweatshop campaign was surely the most explicitly focused, the most unambiguously public, and, in conventional terms, the most successful. But was it infrapolitical? In the context of Velut’s argument, the term infrapolitics helps us describe forms of oppositional politics that eschew direct appeals for state action. I have no quarrel with this construction although it is worth pointing out that if we choose to expand the category in this fashion, we would probably want further to develop a classification that would help us distinguish the various sub-species of infrapolitics in terms of, say, anonymity, degree of cultural opposition, forms of mobilization, clarity of goals, and degree of politicization. Velut makes his case so persuasively that I find myself wondering why I did not myself extend the concept of infrapolitics to include those political movements requiring minimal organization and requiring only small, individual, safe, quotidian acts of targeted consumerism. Such a broadened view of infrapolitics would help us characterize all sorts of consumer boycotts, from the successful United Farm Workers inspired boycott of table grapes to contemporary consumer boycotts of restaurant chains that are seen to treat their customers, employees, or the animals from which the meat they serve comes, unethically.

The zoot suit riots of wartime Los Angeles subtly analyzed by Luis Alvarez are perhaps among the richest research terrains from which to plumb the meaning and conduct of infrapolitics. They illustrate the observation of Paul Willis that “[t]he cultural forms may not say what they mean, nor know what they say, but they mean what they do—at least in the logic of their praxis.” It demonstrates simultaneously the way in which cultural signaling through dress display is easily available to relatively powerless groups and the potential explosiveness of such cultural aффronts to dominant groups, including, in this case, the Los Angeles Police Department. The association of the zoot suit with excess, hyper-sexuality, idleness, jazz, street corner society,
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and its “in-your-face” challenge to wartime austerity and patriotism made it, though perfectly legal in itself, a bold provocation to the hegemonic wartime paradigm of self-sacrifice and work. Alvarez shows us just how lucidly most of the zoot suiters “intended” the signal they were sending and were willing to go beyond dress to their own racial and sexual slurs as well as street-fights. This is the sort of infrapolitics that depends on the cultural signal sent being received and understood for the symbolic affront it is intended to be. The most blatant symbolic affront of this kind—a sort of atomic bomb of symbolic attacks—was at the beginning of the Spanish Civil War when anticlerical revolutionaries invaded cathedrals and exhumed the remains of archbishops, cardinals, and nuns which they then scattered on the steps of churches. For conservative Spaniards the desecration was a declaration of war they never forgot.

I anticipate that readers will derive as much pleasure and instruction as I have from these fine essays. With luck, they and their successors will contribute to the appreciation and understanding of the vast realm of consequential political life that lurks below the deceptive surface of “politics as usual.”

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