

The Role of Language in Four Studies on Power and Resistance

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The following paper examines the question of what role language plays in the central arguments about power in four books: *On the Genealogy of Morality* by Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900); *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* by Michel Foucault; *Black Skin, White Masks* by Frantz Fanon, and *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* by James C. Scott. I explore how language relates to theories of domination ranging from Nietzsche's critique of Judeo-Christian ethical thought, to Foucault's analysis of incarcerating modernity, to the "power of naming," to Fanon on the double-edged sword of the colonizer's language for the colonized who needs to communicate, and finally, to the subversion of the "public transcript" by dominated groups illuminated by Scott.

1. Nietzsche

In Keith Ansell-Pearson's excellent introduction to *On the Genealogy of Morality* by Friedrich Nietzsche, he provides the following quote from another work by Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*: "My philosophy aims at an ordering of rank, not an individualistic morality."¹ Ansell-Pearson says that there has been some confusion about Nietzsche's political thinking because many things he said conflict directly with liberalism. Many of the statements in *On the Genealogy of Morality* are absolutely racist, in fact. How could one construe Nietzsche to be in line with liberal values when one reads anti-semitic statements such as:

The greatest haters in world history, and the most intelligent, have always been priests... Nothing which has been done on earth against "the noble," "the mighty," "the masters," and "the rulers," is worth mentioning compared with what the Jews have done against them: the Jews, that priestly people, which in the last resort was able to gain satisfaction from its enemies and conquerors only through a radical revaluation of their values, that is, through an act of the most deliberate revenge. It was the Jews who, rejecting the aristocratic value equation (good = noble = powerful = beautiful = happy = blessed) ventured, ...saying "Only those who suffer are good, only the poor, the powerless, the lowly are good..." We know who became heir to this Jewish revaluation... I recall what I said on another occasion (*Beyond Good and Evil*)—namely, that the slaves revolt in morality begins with the Jews: a revolt which has two thousand years of history behind it.²

Nietzsche blames 2,000 years of Christian morality on Jewish people. He argues that such morality is unhealthy and he contrasts it with his image of healthy, barbaric, hedonistic aristocrats. One cannot necessarily lay responsibility for this tendency on Friedrich Nietzsche himself since there is evidence that his sister, Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche, a proponent of anti-Semitism whose husband was a prominent anti-Semite, distorted the original intent of her brother's writings when she organized and edited them after his death.³ (His *The Will to Power* may have been tampered with, e.g.) Nevertheless, he died long ago without having had the opportunity to clarify what he meant. For the purposes of this paper, I will base my analysis on the text I have, a standard edition by Cambridge University Press.⁴ In this paper the name "Nietzsche" will refer to the author or authors of *On the Genealogy of Morality*, whoever they may be.

Nietzsche begins his "genealogy" of morality at a point in history two thousand years ago—the birth of Christ—claiming that Christianity was a

religion that had enslaved Europe and was an invention of the Jews, a way to get some kind of revenge on their noble masters, the Germans:

At the center of all these noble races we cannot fail to see the blond beast of prey, the magnificent blond beast avidly prowling round for spoil and victory; this hidden centre needs release from time to time, the beast must out again, must return to the wild...⁵

It is no wonder that Hitler was fond of Nietzsche's writings.

Why the popularity of Nietzsche? For those from an upbringing in Judeo-Christian morality, there is a certain liberation in reading Nietzsche. It is true that the Bible says, "The meek shall inherit the earth," and makes many other similar statements that place selflessness, humility, control of desire, and even weakness in the category "good," and selfishness, boastfulness, the fulfillment of desire, and even strength in the category "evil." Sex and other pleasurable natural functions of the body (indeed, even the body itself) are associated with evil and filth. Hence only a virgin could give birth to Christ. In Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* the ideal creature from Greek mythology is the satyr, half man, half goat, that romps playfully through the forest procreating and fighting all day long. Nietzsche senses a freer morality and ontological condition in the writings from ancient Greece than in the modern West of his day. His argument that Christian morality teaches people to repress and be ashamed of their instincts can be quite convincing. The following passage from Nietzsche brings to mind the pathetic celibate minister in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* who literally does violence to his own body to atone for the sin of desiring a beautiful unmarried woman:

You will already have guessed *what* has really gone on with all this and behind all this: that will to torment oneself, that suppressed cruelty of animal man who has been frightened

back into himself and given an inner life, incarcerated in the “state” to be tamed, and has discovered bad conscience so that he can hurt himself, after the *more natural* outlet of this wish to hurt had been blocked—this man of bad conscience has seized on religious precept in order to provide his self-torture with its most horrific hardness and sharpness. Guilt towards *God*: this thought becomes an instrument of torture. In “God” he seizes upon the ultimate antithesis to his real and irredeemable animal instincts...he pitches himself into the contradiction of God and Devil...We have here a sort of madness of the will showing itself in mental cruelty which is absolutely unparalleled: man’s *will* to find himself guilty...Alas for this crazy, pathetic beast man!...Here is *sickness*, without a doubt, the most terrible sickness ever to rage in man:...The world has been a madhouse for too long!

Nietzsche brings out the unhealthy self-torturing of Christian morality. We must remember that in his time the degree of suffering under the tyranny of the Church, paralyzed and contained through guilt (what Nietzsche calls “bad conscience”) and fear, was far greater than today. It is precisely there, in that attack on tyranny, that we can locate his contribution to the goals of liberalism.

However, to accept Nietzsche’s reasoning is to immediately become trapped in the dialectic of good versus evil. If Christ-like virtues such as selflessness and humility are associated with the “good,” and egotism is associated with the “evil,” then Nietzsche’s method of rebellion is simply to completely invert “good” and “evil.” (Even the famous proponent of capitalism, Adam Smith, would not have associated masters with nobility. In *The Wealth of Nations* he wrote, “All for ourselves and nothing for other people, seems, in every age of the world, to have been the vile maxim of the masters of mankind.”)⁶ In Nietzsche’s “First Essay: ‘Good’ and ‘Evil,’ ‘Good’ and ‘Bad’,” he argues, based on etymological evidence from Latin, Greek,

and German, that the opposition good/evil was the invention of the “pleibes” or “man of *ressentiment*.”⁷ “Good/evil” was created in order to thwart the noble aristocrats. He explains that originally [in pre-Christian days] “good” referred to things that aristocrats associated with themselves (noble, powerful, beautiful) and “bad” to what they associated with the slaves (low, powerless, poor, ugly). Hence the phonetic similarity of “schlecht” (bad) and “schlicht” (plain, simple) in German. In this whole chapter, however, his etymologies and logic are highly questionable. What does the etymology of “arya” (“the rich,” “the propertied” [Aryan]) have to do with “gut” (“good” in German, which he claims meant “Godlike man”)? How could “bellum” (good) become “duellum” (war)?⁸ This entire chapter is based on etymology, but the claims that he makes based on these etymologies are not very convincing.

But his emphasis on the importance of the power of naming is convincing:

The pathos of nobility and distance, as I said, the continuing and predominant feeling of complete and fundamental superiority of a higher ruling kind in relation to a lower kind, to those “below”—that is the origin of the antithesis “good” and “bad.” (The seigneurial privilege of giving names even allows us to conceive of the origin of language itself as a manifestation of the power of the rulers: they say “this is so and so,” they set their seal on everything and every occurrence with a sound and thereby take possession of it, as it were).⁹ [Italics mine]

This idea that the power of naming was (and perhaps still is) the prerogative of the ruling class (the *seigneur* of French, the *junzi* of Chinese) is an important one to keep in mind in interpreting discourses of master and slave, domination and resistance, etc. The rectification of names in pre-modern China (*zhengming*) was considered one of the important skills

of statecraft. There was the understanding that the changing of names, or the incorrect usage of language, would lead to social or political instability. Therefore, only a select group of highly trained and educated members of the ruling class were entrusted with the responsibility of writing dynastic and biographical histories. In such a society a change in writing style could be regarded not only as bad taste but as insubordination or as subversive political action. Nietzsche implies that the slave has usurped the position of the master by writing their own story of morality: “—it is, to use my language, *the herd instinct* which, with that, finally gets its word in (and makes *words*).”¹⁰ (We will discuss this further below in Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks*). The slave has slyly stolen the loudspeaker away from the master.

Rey Chow quotes Confucius:

If names are not correct, then language usage becomes improper.

If language usage is improper, then things cannot be achieved.

This is why the nobleman is devoted to naming appropriately and carrying out language usage appropriately. The nobleman’s language usage is not haphazard but complete.¹¹
[My translation]

One of the most ancient myths about language in many societies has been that by capturing a word one could control reality. The signifier and the signified have been one and the same in the minds of many people. Thus a change in the world of signifiers would lead to a change in the world of objects. The quote from Confucius above may be more sophisticated than this, containing a more abstract knowledge based on experience that change or disorder in language often occurs concurrently with changes in society. Nevertheless, this notion that the powerful are in control of language has a

timeless truth about it: even today many people would make the connection “control of language=control of ideology=control of people.” Who can deny, e.g., that the language of the U.S. Constitution possesses a certain powerful and soothing lure? “We, the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquillity, provide for the common defense...” This passage carries such an air of authority, and the subject is the first person plural—we, you and I, establish justice. The words become written on our souls, compelling us to preserve *our* country, the one that *we* established. The framework for understanding the Constitution is set up by the words selected in its writing.

If Nietzsche rejects morality wholesale (i.e., morality as he knew it), then what is his prescription for creating healthy aristocrats, or the “overman” as he called it in *The Birth of Tragedy*? If society is the site of overt domination of the strong over the weak, then what is there left to ennoble us? What is there left to live for? His answer is aesthetics, the quest for the creation and appreciation of the beautiful. He makes it very clear that a subjugation of the majority of people is necessary for the production of culture. The fault of the priest is that “he has ruined taste *in artibus et litteris*” (in arts and letters).¹² Beauty in art and letters for Nietzsche is not reconcilable with what he calls morality. Again, he returns to the Bible:

I do not like the *New Testament*, you have worked that out by now; it almost disturbs me to be so very isolated in my taste regarding this most valued, over-valued work (the taste of two millenia is *against* me): but it is no use! “Here I stand, I can do no other”,¹³—I have the courage of my bad taste. The *Old Testament*—well, that is something quite different: every respect for the *Old Testament*! I find in it great men, heroic landscape and something of that which is most rare on earth, the incomparable naïvety of the *strong heart*; even more I find a people... In contrast, in the *New Testament* I find nothing but

petty sectarian groupings, nothing but rococo of the soul, nothing but arabesques, crannies and oddities... Humility and pomposity right next to each other; a garrulousness of feeling which almost stupefies; ostensibly passionate but lacking passion; embarrassing gesticulation; obviously breeding is lacking here... The ascetic ideal not only spoilt health and *taste*. It spoilt a third, fourth, fifth, sixth thing as well—I shall refrain from saying what they all were (I would never reach the end!)¹⁴ [My italics]

His problem with the *New Testament* and its morality is that it is ugly for him. The ‘sugariness’ and dishonesty of it is all too disagreeable. To the extent that the *Old Testament* was less moralistic it was more aesthetically pleasing for him. The ascetic ideal destroys the aesthetic ideal for Nietzsche. Ultimately, however, what he does when confronted with the conflict between the incongruity of Christian morality and his ideal of aristocratic taste is to completely toss Christian morality overboard.

2. Foucault

What Foucault does with the humanism and “progress” since the Enlightenment is not so different from what Nietzsche did with Judeo-Christian morality, as I described above. In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* Foucault convincingly demonstrates through a history of the prison since the Enlightenment that much of our supposedly benign humanism and liberalism is also a means of containment, that in the midst of the monarchical tyranny before the Enlightenment there was a greater potential for rebellion and illegality. Many of the features of the prison were incorporated into other modern institutions such as the school and the welfare bureaucracy, which were formed alongside the prison. As the power to punish was made more diffuse, being taken from the King and finely distributed out to the bourgeoisie in the form of new professions of containment such as prison administrators, psychologists, “educationalists,”

and legalists, that power became more and more disguised. Since the open possession and exercise of power for manipulating others to one's own advantage was anathema to the ideologies of freedom, individualism, and democracy, power had to be masked. The body was no longer the site of discipline, but the soul: the "carceral" (institutions of containment such as the prison, the school, or the factory) replaced physical punishment as the preferred method for dealing with crime, illegality, and aberrant behavior. Both Nietzsche and Foucault highlight the potential of liberalist thought systems to become an "interiorized form of social control."¹⁵

Foucault writes

Perhaps, too, we should abandon a whole tradition that allows us to imagine that knowledge can exist only where the power relations are suspended and that knowledge can develop only outside its injunctions, its demands and its interests. Perhaps we should abandon the belief that power makes mad and that, by the same token, the renunciation of power is one of the conditions of knowledge. We should rather admit that power produces knowledge...that power and knowledge directly imply one another...¹⁶

Because "all knowledge presupposes power relations," he unites power and knowledge into the single concept "power-knowledge."¹⁷ Between the mid-18th century and the present Foucault delineates a gradual process of transformation in punishment from physical torture and execution towards bodily containment and re-training. In rough outline the steps go from prison to the penitentiary to the reformatory to the carceral—a gradual trend towards increasingly gentler forms of punishment. At the same time that this trend towards gentleness was underway, there was a consistent expansion of the production of knowledge. Criminals, derelicts, and indeed any persons who did not fit within the normative categories or averages came under scrutiny. Rather than just cut off the hands of a thief, s/he was

detained and forced into a new regimen meant to correct her/him. S/he would be sent through a standardized assembly line, studied and instilled with new habits—in one end and out the other, and re-injected into society. The design, production, and maintenance of these reforming factories required the training and reproduction of a huge body of workers possessing power-knowledge of law, psychology, medicine, engineering, etc. He writes

Within a short space of time, detention became the essential form of punishment... The scaffold, where the body of the tortured criminal had been exposed to the ritually manifested force of the sovereign, the punitive theatre in which the representation of punishment was permanently available to the social body, was replaced by a great enclosed complex, and hierarchized structure that was integrated into the very body of the state apparatus.¹⁸

A busy, strict, and constant schedule, panopticism (the technique of constant surveillance of prisoners), a careful recording and analysis of every move of the prisoner each day, and an extreme attention to minor offenses and slightly aberrant behavior were some of the new techniques of this reform system.¹⁹ Our modern carceral system was in place by 1840 with the opening of a prison in Mettray, France; here all these techniques were applied.²⁰

Foucault states that “this great carceral network [‘colonies for the poor, abandoned vagrant children,’ ‘almshouses’ for ‘poor innocent girls whose mothers’ immorality has exposed to precocious perversity,’ in other words other prison-like institutions] reaches all the disciplinary mechanisms that function throughout society.” This then became what he calls “the carceral archipelago.”²¹ Criminality was transformed into sickness, the judge into a doctor. Everyone is now a judge: “the society of the teacher-judge, the doctor-judge, the educator-judge, the ‘social worker’-judge; it is on them that the universal reign of the normative is based.”²² All modern institutions of

education and correction, he argues, borrowed the normativity-training techniques of the prison. The power-knowledge of these techniques has been so widely dispersed throughout society that we apply those techniques to contain each other and thereby ourselves without even being conscious of it. Foucault prevents us from remaining unconscious of it.

Both *Discipline and Punish* and *On the Genealogy of Morality* contain valuable critiques of our modern-day omnipresent liberalist ideology. Foucault and Nietzsche's writings have the potential to expose some of the hidden hypocrisies of humanism and liberalism. However, although they point out problems with these thought systems, neither offers any palpable alternatives. *Discipline and Punish* especially lacks a life-affirming vision. Each is a "history of the present" with a strong sense of nostalgia for the past, before the bourgeoisie took away the King's power. At least Nietzsche leaves us with the aesthetics (however impractical it is) and the vision of the ancient Greek way of life that positively affirmed, instead of repressing "natural powers and energies."²³ But both of them seem trapped and unable to escape their dialectics. Foucault says in an interview with Gilles Deleuze, "This is a struggle against power, a struggle aimed at revealing and undermining power where it is most invisible and insidious."²⁴ Even as he attacks liberalism he promotes liberalism. He is waging a war "against power," attempting to help the downtrodden undermine tyrannical regimes, and himself producing power-knowledge. He is waging a war against liberalism with liberalist principles.²⁵ However, he succeeds in making us aware of the connection between our humanistic knowledge and our power to contain each other, and causing us to question the prevalent assumption that we are freer today than we were in the dark days of tyranny before the Enlightenment.

3. Fanon

As with Foucault, Frantz Fanon likewise acknowledges the link between knowledge and power in *Black Skin, White Masks*, clearly stating this fact early in the book: "Mastery of language affords remarkable power."²⁶ He

discusses this power-knowledge (to transplant Foucault's term) in his first chapter, "The Negro and Language." In broad terms, his book represents an attempt to do a psychoanalytic investigation of the colonized black man, with the goal being the "disalienation of the black man" and all other colonized people.²⁷ He does not investigate the psychological alienation of the black woman, as if the mental state of colonized women is less important or unrelated to that of men. This remains the most problematic feature of this seminal work. Here I will consider mainly the ideas in the first chapter, which have to do with the role of language in colonization.

Fanon explains that in a colonial situation colonized people are judged both by fellow colonized people and by colonizers based upon how well they speak the colonizer's language. Providing a useful example of the power of language, he says that the colonized man who speaks well is feared: "Keep an eye on that one, he is almost white."²⁸ Merely by acquiring knowledge of the colonizer's language, he becomes an object of fear and suspicion for the people of his native culture. People can intuitively sense another's superior power through the words s/he speaks. On the other hand, white men "talk down" to colonized blacks, treating them like children, since they expect, and perhaps want them, to be unable to speak like adults: "A white man addressing a Negro behaves exactly like an adult with a child and starts smirking, whispering, patronizing, cozening. It is not one white man I have watched, but hundreds."²⁹ He says that white men will also speak down to blacks by speaking in a fake pidgin: "You—Africa? Dakar, Rufisque, whorehouse, dames, café, mangoes, bananas..."³⁰ The level of language ability is tied to perceived maturity level and mental capacity. One can only aspire to becoming a real human being by mastering the language of the colonizer, and even then they must listen to statements like, "Here is a black man who handles the French language as no white man today can."³¹ No matter how proficient they become, they are still separated out with race and treated like an anomaly, or a well-trained monkey. Social power accrues as language skill rises, but social power accrues only to a point lower than whites.

He quotes Damourette and Pichon: "Every dialect is a way of thinking."³² It is also true that every language is a way of thinking. When one speaks a language one takes on the world and the culture that go with it.³³ English is a language that is very concerned with having and getting, sex, and number. We ask, "Do you have the time?" to mean "Do you know the time?" We always specify whether objects and people are singular or plural and whether animals and people are male or female, with words like "he/she" and "hen/rooster." Many of the world's languages do not compel one to make such distinctions, but make other distinctions. Japanese, for example, is a language that causes the speaker to constantly express her/his social status relative to the listener or other persons referred to when speaking. Fanon states, "...to speak is to exist absolutely for the other."³⁴ Hegel said that the one who exists absolutely for the other is the bondsman. The lord exists for himself. With this clever twist of Hegel's statement Fanon is making a profound statement. To speak is to obey the rules of the culture behind a language. We speak in order for the other to understand, so for the colonized, speaking in the language of the colonizer immediately puts him in bondage. However, this means that to speak is to be in bondage, for anyone. In this (and other examples below) Fanon succeeds in going beyond the dialectic of master and slave.

For Fanon language is a matter of social distinction just like what the color of a man's wife's skin is. Jean Veneuse, a black character in a French autobiographical novel written by a black author, says to himself, "I as a public employee am going to show the genuine negroes the differences that separate me from them." ³⁵ He desires to marry a white woman, and show her off in front of white men. Interestingly, the same character also says, "I think in French, France is my religion." His identity and social status (in his own mind as well as in the society that evaluates him) are completely dependent on the color of his wife's skin and the language he speaks. To a certain extent, woman and language are means to the acquisition of whiteness, and if not displacing the white man, at least joining his ranks and sharing in his power. If we combine this with what Fanon says about

the “abandonment-neurosis” of a person like Veneuse,³⁶ then language and woman become things to be acquired in order overcome this neurosis. Here Hegel’s influence is as apparent as Freud’s. Of course, Freud’s Oedipus Complex comes to mind first, but also Hegel’s lord and bondsman who seek the death of the other. In Hegelian terms, control of the colonizer’s woman and language would be a way to achieve a self-consciousness that exists for itself. Fanon seems to agree with Hegel regarding the psyche of the oppressed, but for Fanon everyone is neither completely oppressor nor oppressed but a certain portion of both.

In spite of Fanon’s use of Hegel and Freud, there is a powerful critique here of the human sciences and philosophy of the West. Fanon uses Hegel and Freud to critique Hegel and Freud. He is saying that one of the greatest ideological weapons of Western thought, that is deeply embedded in the human sciences, is the distinction between human and animal. His point leads one to think that without that distinction we cannot justify our exploitation of animals or foreign people—the two are closer for us than we would like to admit. “...All these inquiries lead only in one direction: to make man admit that he is nothing, absolutely nothing—and that he must put an end to the narcissism on which he relies in order to imagine that he is different from the other “animals.” “Having reflected on that, I grasp my narcissism with both hands and I turn my back on the degradation of those who would make man a mere mechanism.”³⁷ This is why the mastery of language is so crucial as a mark of civilization. Many people say, “Only human beings have language; that’s what separates us from the animals.” Therefore, this means that, “If you do not *have* language [i.e. my language], then you are not human [i.e. what I know to be human].” On the contrary though, other animals do have language, and even a mechanism such as the computer has language.³⁸ “What are called by common consent the human sciences have their own drama. Should one postulate a type for human reality and describe its psychic modalities only through deviations from it [what Freud did], or should one not rather strive unremittingly for a concrete and ever new understanding of man?” He says that if we cannot

talk about philosophy, i.e. our basic needs, then we will work within the psychoanalytical framework and study the “failures,” like engine failures. Fanon seeks cures for the narcissism of both the colonizer and the colonized.³⁹

Who in psychoanalysis and philosophy could be more narcissistic than Hegel and Freud? How many times in the space of ten pages in Hegel’s chapter entitled “Lordship and Bondage” in *Phenomenology of Spirit* does he use the word “self”? One hundred? Hegel writes

Self-consciousness is faced by another self-consciousness; it has *come out of itself*. This has a twofold significance: first, it has lost itself, for it finds itself as an *other* being; secondly, in doing so it has superseded the other, for it does not see the other as an essential being, but in the other sees its own self.⁴⁰

According to Hegel, in the other we see ourselves, and yet, we also “seek the other’s death.”⁴¹ Therefore, by killing the other, we kill ourselves. He writes, “Death is the *natural* negation of consciousness.” Through this negation of the other, one attains self-consciousness which “exists for itself,” i.e., the master. The bondsman, on the other hand, lives for the other. He is held in bondage because he has not attained a self-consciousness that exists for itself.

Fanon’s psychoanalysis of the black colonized man posits a view of him as a split consciousness. With the acquisition of the colonizer’s language comes a “change in personality.” Fanon, a black man from Antilles, identifies his own consciousness as divided. There is a “solidarity with and alienation from the colonized population.”⁴² This is a theory of the colonization of the soul which, I think, does succeed in beginning to step out of the Hegellian dialectic of master and slave.

4. Scott

What are the arts of resistance at the disposal of subordinated groups of people? This is the main question that James C. Scott's *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* addresses itself to.⁴³ His book sites an extremely eclectic collection of songs, poems, anthropological studies, anecdotes, rituals, parades, etc. to demonstrate the ways in which subordinated people feign deference in front of powerholders while resisting them behind their backs or through linguistic or behavioral performances that are encrypted or coded in a way that powerholders do not detect their deception. He introduces the terms "public transcript" to describe the public performance of deference meant to be read by the dominant and "hidden transcript" for the "off-stage" or coded performance meant to be read by fellow subordinates. He says that the public transcript constrains the possibilities of performance for people of dominant groups just as it does for people of subordinate groups. He recalls a story from George Orwell's *Inside the Whale and Other Essays*, in which he, the colonist in India was forced to shoot an elephant after there was no longer any need to, in order to maintain the public transcript in front of the colonized Indians there that the English were always powerful and in control.⁴⁴ The following passage from an ancient Indian Buddhist text is one of his many examples of how subordinated groups feign deference in the public transcript and resist in the hidden transcript:

O Bhante, our slaves...do another thing with their bodies, say another with their speech, and have a third in their mind.

On seeing the master, they rise up, take things from his hands, discarding this and talking that; others show a seat, fan him with a hand fan, wash his feet, thus doing all that needs to be done. But in his absence, they do not even look if oil is being spilled, they do not turn to look even if there were a loss of hundreds or thousands to the master."⁴⁵

Thus from ancient times subordinated groups have conformed to the public transcript while creating a hidden transcript.

However, as Scott's example shows above, people of dominant groups have always known about this deception. If we already know this, then why does he cite so many examples? He says that although dominant groups may know of the existence of a hidden transcript, they often have no access to it, either because they live in separate quarters, the transcript is played when they are not present, or they do not possess the cultural or linguistic knowledge necessary to understand it. He sees the hidden transcript as a great source of power that has not been recognized in writings on power and resistance. "Everyday forms of resistance" have the potential to culminate in actual rebellion or gradual gains in collective power. Scott's portrait of subordinate groups from around the world and at various times in the past presents the subordinated as more active and resourceful in resisting than they are often presented.

The view of subordinated groups that comes out in this book has the advantage of offering a more hopeful vision of colonized or subjected people than we have seen in Nietzsche, Foucault, and Fanon's works above, and of giving actual, positive evidence of many different forms of resistance that subordinated groups have invented. With this valuable contribution in mind, I would suggest two theoretical weaknesses: He puts too much faith in the power of ambiguity or deception in linguistic or behavioral utterances, discounting the power of the dominant group's linguistic and cultural capital. And he returns to an overly simplistic model of domination, similar to the master/slave dialectic of Hegel. He misses Fanon's point that in sites of colonization the colonized often has a split consciousness, identifying herself/himself with both the colonizer and the colonized. S/he must absorb the culture of the colonizer and, by so doing, inequalities in levels of absorption develop and a hierarchy within the colonized group results. In the American South, house slaves had advantages over the field slaves, and those who could produce the utterances most appealing to the masters would gain power over the others. This is an essential

element in the operation of colonization, which Scott does not treat.

For critique number one above I turn again to language. Scott makes the point that subordinated groups will enforce conformity to a stigmatized dialect in order to increase solidarity among members of the group, and by doing so, they can even create a culture that is opaque to members of the dominant group.⁴⁶ He refers to a study that demonstrated that male speakers of a stigmatized dialect in England spoke English that was closer to the prestige dialect than they thought. For the women the opposite was true. They thought that they spoke the prestige dialect better than they actually did. The conclusion drawn was that the men would gain in status by speaking their native dialect, and that their group maintains solidarity and unity by enforcing conformity to their own linguistic standard, discouraging and punishing linguistic defection toward the prestige dialect. For him, this is a way of “defending the hidden transcript” (title of this section). From this and other similar examples, he concludes that Pierre Bourdieu misses the fact that linguistic distinction can work both ways—not only in favor of the dominant group but also in favor of the subordinate group:

As an integral part of their claim to superiority, ruling castes are at pains to elaborate styles of speech, dress, consumption, gesture, carriage, and etiquette that distinguish them as sharply as possible from the lower orders. In racial, colonial, or status-based social orders, this cultural segregation also discourages unofficial contact between orders for fear of contamination. This combination of distinctiveness and apartheid creates, as Bourdieu has emphasized, an elite culture that is an illegible “hieroglyph,” *defying easy emulation by subordinates*. What he fails to note is that the same process that created an elite culture nearly impenetrable from below also encourages the elaboration of a subordinate culture that is opaque to those above it.⁴⁷[Italics mine]

Bourdieu's point seems to be that by preventing members of the subordinate group from acquiring the linguistic capital that would enable them to produce utterances like those of the dominant group, the dominant group can monopolize positions of power. If a member of the subordinate group can produce all her/his utterances in the prestige dialect, then s/he could gain the prestige and authority that comes with such ability. Is not the ability to exclude a far more powerful tool than opaqueness? This is hardly a crucial oversight. Scott implies that subordinated groups seek to maintain their differences from the dominant group in order to maintain their opacity and keep the hidden transcript going. What Scott misses is that the ability of one group to monopolize positions of authority is far more strategically essential than the ability of one group to make their utterances opaque to the other. (The dominant group has at least equal potential to make their utterances opaque as the subordinated group). If all the members of the subordinated group seek to keep the distinction between themselves and the dominant group by not learning the prestige dialect of their language, will not this result in all of them being dominated? On the whole, cultural and linguistic distinction favors the dominant group. Why would the tactic of maintaining such distinctions be such an effective method of resistance? There are other methods of fostering solidarity.

To return to my second critique, Scott tends to treat subordinated groups as one unified party. So if a slave shows deference to his master and by doing so serves his self-interest, then Scott would say that the slave gained in power. On an individual level this may be true, but Scott does not allow that his deference may damage the power of the group as a whole. Scott does not make a clear distinction between the interests of the larger subordinated group and the interests of smaller subgroups or individuals within the larger group. Bourdieu is right that verbal or symbolic concessions do constitute real concessions of power or "symbolic taxes."⁴⁸ Symbolic capital is easily converted into material capital. In a capitalist economy linguistic subordination is an expression of differences in economic capital. Scott ignores the intimate connection between linguistic

domination and economic domination. As Fanon said, “intelligence never saved anyone.” To say that a group of slaves made a very clever ploy—saying one thing while meaning another to gain power for themselves—accomplishes nothing except to say that slaves are smarter than they act.

5. Conclusion

In my discussion above of these texts concerning power and resistance, I focused on the question of how these thinkers view language as an instrument of suppression or resistance. Nietzsche’s notion that the power of naming was once the exclusive prerogative of the aristocrats shows recognition of the possibility of creating language that supports particular ideologies. He teaches that the terms “good/evil” contribute to a “false consciousness” (which, of course, is another word for ideology). In Judeo-Christianity “living” (i.e., enjoying life, doing what is natural) is never far from evil. Nietzsche shows that belief in the ideas behind Judeo-Christian morality leads to a false consciousness that is easily manipulated by those in power. (Many of those in power in Nietzsche’s day were the clergy). But his way to escape this language framework of enslavement is to promote character and action that is associated with the term “evil.” Nietzsche himself was enslaved to the dialectic of good and evil and was not able to transcend it. Such is the limitation and danger of Nietzsche. What we could learn from Nietzsche about the power of language is that one method of resistance might be to create language that supports some ideologies and counters others, in Rey Chow’s terms, language that would serve “tactics of intervention.”

In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* Foucault sounds a warning about the danger of assuming that the liberalism and humanism of the past two hundred years has been making steady progress toward greater liberty for humanity. He does not specifically address the question of the role of language, but he does say that all knowledge implies power. Inasmuch as language is a form of knowledge, language would also imply

power in Foucault's thought. *Discipline and Punish* would encourage us to investigate the links between language and power. Foucault and Nietzsche suggest to me that studies should be conducted in which one problematizes specific words or language from liberalism and humanism, exploring how the concepts behind them serve interests of domination or resistance.

For Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks* language is a key weapon in colonizing the mind and soul. Language holds out the prospect of power to both the colonized and the colonizer. Only by mastering the language of the colonizer can the colonized aspire to approach recognition as a human being from the colonizer. For the colonizer language is a way of distinguishing themselves from the colonized and a way of creating a hierarchy of power within the colonized group. Fanon points out that one colonized person's superior mastery of the language can provide them with an edge over the others, a position of superior power over other people of inferior linguistic mastery. This is only one example of how in Fanon's approach colonized people both colonize and are colonized. His view of colonization as a system that leads to mental sickness and the strategy of healing this sickness in the souls of the victims of colonization points to a way out of the dialectics such as we saw above in Hegel and Nietzsche.

In *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* Scott introduces the concepts "public transcript" and "hidden transcript." These concepts are based on the metaphor that says that actions can be read as texts. Scott is not original in this metaphor, but he is original in finding many forms of resistance around the world that subordinated groups have used. One should ask whether the strategy of citing numerous examples of resistance is in fact one to be followed. We already know that subordinated groups deceive powerholders. Powerholders also deceive subordinated groups. Perhaps it is inspiring or a good reminder to say that subordinated groups can exploit the linguistic or cultural gap between themselves and dominant groups, and maybe there is too much focus on the negativity of domination, as Scott hints. *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* is provocative, and

perhaps inspiring, in that it points us in a direction to look for subversive “arts of resistance,” but it has the danger of reproducing naiveté about the dangerous ideological power of language in the service of the dominant.

References

- ¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Keith Ansell-Pearson, ed., Carol Diethe, trans. (Cambridge UP, 1994) x.
- ² Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality* 18.
- ³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Will_to_Power_%28manuscript%29
- ⁴ The text I have is Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Keith Ansell-Pearson, ed., Carol Diethe, trans. (Cambridge UP, 1994).
- ⁵ Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality* 25.
- ⁶ Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1776), book 3, <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/3300>.
- ⁷ Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality* 24.
- ⁸ Historical linguistics has shown that a radical diachronic phonetic change such as from [b] to [d] is extremely unusual. Two words merely rhyming does not necessarily indicate a common origin.
- ⁹ Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality* 13.
- ¹⁰ Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality* 13.
- ¹¹ Rey Chow, *Writing Diaspora: Tactics of Intervention in Contemporary Cultural Studies* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1993) 104-05.
- ¹² Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality* 113.
- ¹³ Quote from Luther according to Ansell-Pearson, editor. Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*.
- ¹⁴ Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality* 114-15.
- ¹⁵ Ansell-Pearson's Introduction to Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality* xvi.
- ¹⁶ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Second Vintage Books ed. (New York: Random House, 1995) 27.
- ¹⁷ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*.
- ¹⁸ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* 115.
- ¹⁹ He talks of “training the body.” Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* 131.
- ²⁰ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* 293.
- ²¹ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* 298.
- ²² Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* 304.
- ²³ Ansell-Pearson's Introduction to Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality* xxiii.
- ²⁴ Michel Foucault, “Intellectuals and Power: A Conversation between Michel

Foucault and Gilles Deleuze," *Language, Counter-memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, Donald F. Bouchard, ed. (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1977) 208.

²⁵ This partly explains why *Discipline and Punish* from beginning to end carries such a droning tone of lament.

²⁶ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, Charles Lam Markmann, trans. (New York: Grove Press, 1967) 18.

²⁷ Fanon 38.

²⁸ Fanon 21.

²⁹ Fanon 31.

³⁰ Fanon 33.

³¹ Fanon 17.

³² Fanon 25.

³³ Fanon 38.

³⁴ Fanon 17.

³⁵ Fanon 70. From an autobiographical novel by René Maran, *Un homme pareil aux autres* (Paris: Editions Arc-en-Ciel, 1947).

³⁶ Fanon 76-77.

³⁷ Fanon 22-23.

³⁸ A recent, fascinating book on the subject "What is language and how does it work?" is Steven Pinker's *The Language Instinct* (Harper Perennial: New York, 1995). Like Chomsky, he maintains that language is instinct. It is something built into the brain of a baby, like the instinct of a newborn to grasp when a finger is put in its hand. Thus it is closer to an animal-like function than an abstract, intellectual function.

³⁹ There is a more direct critique of Hegel and Sartre. Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* 132 and 138.

⁴⁰ G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, A.V. Miller, trans. (Oxford UP, 1977) 111.

⁴¹ Hegel 114.

⁴² Fanon 77.

⁴³ James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*. (New Haven: Yale UP, 1990).

⁴⁴ Scott 49.

⁴⁵ Scott 35.

⁴⁶ Scott 129-33.

⁴⁷ Scott 133.

⁴⁸ Scott sites Bourdieu on this point: Scott 47-48.