Listening, Unlike a State: Thick Description and the Infrapolitics of U.S. Pop Music

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For nearly a half century, James Scott has advanced distinctive arguments about the magnitude at which human affairs occur and, also, about the type of focal points that scholars should use as they gaze at history. In his opinion, students of politics should stare less at hierarchically organized institutions, such as states, global banks, and nation-wide social movements. They are important, but not as important as their press secretaries, heralds, publicists, and other spokespersons claim. Instead, scholars should squint at smaller and often overlooked initiatives by non-elites, who neither hold positions of prestige nor can control behavior through coercion. Every day, these actors inconspicuously ignore rules, disregard laws, and violate norms.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Scott labels these infractions “infrapolitics” because, like infrared light, they are invisible to the naked eye, yet they are omnipresent and shape events.[[2]](#footnote-2) To use a different metaphor to convey Scott’s basic point: there is a type of microscopic political conflict that resembles irritating gnats in zoos. Even though they are difficult to see, infrapolitics bite, nibble, irritate, and in other ways bug the enormous animals – those big organizations with grand titles and formal lines of authority – and thereby shape how the larger critters rumble, moan, survive, and die.

According to Scott, those who engage in infrapolitics – who regularly breach customary laws of usage (such as poachers and squatters), who behave insolently before their betters (such as looking truculently at officials or snickering at supervisors), and who engage in minor insubordination (such as foot-dragging at work) – are not incompetent, scallywags, or miscreants. They are prudential human beings who refuse to be tossed and bossed by others. So, they push back through miniscule transgressions of codes of conduct and norms of civility. If there were opportunities to confront masters, oppressors, and exploiters openly and safely, these subalterns would do so. Safe opportunities for denouncement, disobedience, and dissent, however, are sorely missing. The oppressed therefore transgress legal, religious, and other normative boundaries obliquely.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Scott believes that infrapolitical activities have important long-run consequences because when aggregated, these tiny acts of misbehavior often upend the projects of the seemingly powerful. One of his favorite examples is the Russian Revolution, which, he avers, was neither orchestrated or launched by a vanguard, nor inspired by a vision of communism. Rather, countless poor, conscripted soldiers from peasant households individually deserted the country’s military in order to tend their crops.[[4]](#footnote-4) Likewise, Napoleon’s grandiose dreams of empire, for example, were twice defeated by uncoordinated and spontaneous desertions and draft evasions.[[5]](#footnote-5)

This paper explores Scott’s notion analytically and empirically. The paper first reviews some ambiguities in the concept and, thereafter, notes that Scott’s concept has two distinct sides. As a result, it moves in two directions: toward pell-mell, small-scale transgressions by individuals that Scott usually calls “everyday resistance,” and toward gatherings in unmonitored places that Scott labels “offstage spaces.” The paper then describes the phenomenon of rock ’n’ roll in the United States as a possible type of “offstage space” at which those who are bossed around in daily life meet and through antiauthoritarian rituals express and share antiauthoritarian sentiments and dreams.

The paper closes with a mild critique of the notion of infrapolitics. Even though it helps students of society imagine that rulers are simply obeyed and in the humblest of social settings dissatisfaction can be seen, the idea also distracts attention from political questions about how clashes of opinion and value are expressed and reconciled in off-stage settings, and about how the forging of common interests occurs.

II. Thinking Like Scott

Scott is a political anthropologist and neither reasons nor writes like an analytic political philosopher. The latter typically begins with a sharp, unequivocal concept or two, and then logically deduces hypotheses that apply to a wide range of human affairs. The philosophic analyst – for instance, a rational-choice theorist – thereby reveals consequences, ironies, and paradoxes that escape most people’s notice. In contrast: Scott, regardless if the format he chooses is a medium-length journal article detailing a single ritual or tome offering scores of vignettes, pairs stories of daily life with novel metaphors and analogies. The result is a line of loosely linked parables, in which he pairs a quotidian tale (say, about the abandonment of an expensive harvester in a rice paddy) with a pithy and often humorous saying (say, about the ways coral can limit the movement of a ship of state) to yield an insight that can be applied to other times and places.

Although Scott’s does not reason abstractly, one can discern in his historical-poetic writings several recurrent generalizations about human affairs.[[6]](#footnote-6) First of all, he consistently adopts a pluralistic and a conflictual understanding of culture, or systems of meaning and practice by which humans interact. Disagreements about goals, priorities, pain, wisdom, and fairness characterize his accounts of praying, helping, farming, and trading. He portrays cultural agreements as being re-negotiated constantly in every aspect of life. There is minimal consensus and integration time, space, and spheres of activity. Culture lacks structure and stability.

Furthermore, those government leaders who ignore the omnipresence of cultural disagreement do so at their peril. He notes, for example, that Lenin failed as an administrative leader because he was blind to the difference between constructing an electrical system for Russia and ruling people. Electricity, Scott wryly notes, is silent. It therefore can be unilaterally generated, directed, and redirected by a government. People, however, are loud, unruly, and creative. Their actions therefore cannot be controlled or predicted, even by a tightly organized revolutionary party.[[7]](#footnote-7)

The tension – between (1) the messiness and bubbliness of society and (2) the obdurate belief among government officials that they can somehow tame society and order it according to a single, coherent set of values – is arguably the central puzzle around which Scott’s scholarship evolves. Moreover, he does not see this tension as disappearing as world history inevitably unfolds. To the contrary: it seems to becoming more intense. According to Scott, during the twentieth century the tendency to misjudge badly the amount of liveliness and contrariness in society – a blindness that is part of a architectonic outlook Scott labels “high modernism” – had become an almost universal trait among leaders of government bureaucracies, national banks, and other gigantic institutions residing in capital cities. High-modernism, “best conceived as strong (one might even say muscle-bound) version of the beliefs in scientific and technical progress that were associated with industrialization in Western Europe and in North America from roughly 1830 until World War I,”[[8]](#footnote-8) rests on a faith that through accurate measurement and deductions from a few universal, unchanging laws of nature, elites can move reality in a desired direction. The flip side of this faith in predictive and manipulative powers of science and technology was a disdain for experiential reasoning that everyday people acquire through their daily practices in specific settings. Leaders of modern states see everyday people as ignorant, tradition bound, and short-sighted, and view the jerry-rigged social arrangements of locals as puny and malleable. Because of this arrogance, elites have become increasingly impatient with popular opposition to governmental plans. “The logical outcome was some form of slide-rule authoritarianism in the interest, presumably, of all.”[[9]](#footnote-9)

The drama of politics for Scott arises from the stiff-necked refusal of citizens, workers, and other subjects to be ruled for their own good. Scott forthrightly rejects the notion that people sooner or later accept situations of subservience or are easily persuaded by social superiors to accept the current course of history as benign. He finds notions of brainwashing by regime leaders, by mass media, or by some other structural feature of society far-fetched. In Scott’s vision, humans are not dummies. Allegedly, we learn over our lifetimes that attempts to boss, manipulate, exploit, dictate, and oppress us occur at all moments and at all levels of social existence: within our families, among friends and neighbors, at worksites and in stores, in schools and churches, along streets and at monuments, between towns and between countries, and so on. Rather than accept and defer and view authority relationships as legitimate, we constantly fight back.[[10]](#footnote-10)

What has changed over the centuries, according to Scott, is the lopsidedness in the relative power between the rulers and the ruled. The scale of the legal, monetary, and coercive resources of the most powerful individuals and groups in society command is unprecedented and dwarfs what is available to everyday people. True, there often is an absence of rule of law and constitutional protections in those societies that western-trained scholars typically label either “peasant,” “traditional,” or “pre-civilized,” societies. But this difference in legal conditions is in most respects superficial. In so-called “liberal” and “civilized” societies that are technologically advanced, both the rule of law and constitutional rights constrain the powerful from treating the less powerful as mere pawns only *in theory*. *In practice*, those who inhabit the highest offices in the state push citizens around according to the officials’ notions of the social good, and who own the largest amounts of money-making property routinely bend laws and apply norms to their advantages, and those with less wealth, status, and connections scurry for protection.[[11]](#footnote-11)

To fight back, those with comparative few resources adopt tactics of under-the-radar resistance. At this moment, for example, it is likely that somewhere in the United States a poorly paid data-entry operator is purchasing personal goods on-line while being technically on the clock; a fast-food cook, who did not receive an expected wage increase, is taking revenge by “accidentally” overcooking and burning a burger or two; and a resident in an unkempt apartment complex is, in retaliation, being tardy with a rent payment. Such daily obstructionist behavior may annoy employers, landlords, and their supervisory minions. The acts are unlikely to prompt overly harsh responses, however, especially if the slackers appear to be otherwise acting courteously. The absence of open defiance, Scott says, is primarily what distinguishes infrapolitics from civil mutiny, wildcat strikes, street rioting, protest marches, and other types of bold resistance that most scholars of social movements and collective action investigate. For Scott, true infrapolitics is muffled, masked, and indirect. One must look very closely to even recognize that infrapolitics is occurring.

II. Ambiguities and Subtypes

Intrigued and inspired by Scott’s ideas about widespread, under-the-radar resistance, some scholars have applied his ideas to such seemingly trivial acts as gardening in vacant lots without permission, spray-painting personal signatures on the exterior walls of buildings, or cracking rude jokes about government leaders at private parties. In course of their empirical investigations, several scholars have uncovered some tensions and gaps in his seemingly straight-forward notion.[[12]](#footnote-12)

One source of bewilderment involves the logical and empirical relationship between infrapolitics and more institutionalized and public forms of politics. Is the relationship dichotomous or continuous, disconnected or symbiotic, or what? The vagueness arises in part from Scott’s use of an ocular metaphor, “infra-,” to label the relative visibility of the type of political conflict he wishes to understand. Like the notion “inflight,” the notion of infrapolitics linguistically merges two separable ideas. It in part denotes a subject’s inability to perceive a type of politics. This suggests a dichotomy (either an observer sees this particular type of politics or the observer doesn’t). But “infra” also refers to the object itself and locates it on along a scale or series – for example, when we speak of “infrared light.” This suggests continuity, not dichotomy. So, are infrapolitics and institutionalized politics polar opposites that never touch or interact? Are they something like the endpoints of a spectrum of human attempts to shape history? Or, do these two types of politics blend, overlap, or interact at some point(s)? For example, might infrared politics provide the emotional resources necessary for more openly organized and larger scale acts of resistance to the state, to corporations, and to other institutionalized bosses?[[13]](#footnote-13) Could the two types of politics be symbiotic?

A second and related ambiguity involves scale. Does the notion infrared politics refer only actions launched by solitary individuals, without open exchanges or direct discussions with others? Or can the notion of infrared politics include modest yet larger collective actions that are organized in advance – say, a rent-strike against an absent and inattentive landlord; a wildcat strike against upcoming layoffs; or a neighborhood gang’s violence against perceived abuses by outsiders? If infrared politics can include the latter types of community-level activity, what is threshold of organization, of dialogue, and of leadership separates infrared politics from other forms of pressure-group politics and power struggles, such as organized marches or city-wide boycotts?

A third topic that bewilders scholars who try to follow Scott’s footsteps involves human awareness and consciousness. To count as “infrapolitics,” how muffled and unstated must be the actor’s tactical strategy? Can there be unintended or uncalculated infrapolitics? Must a foot-dragger at a worksite have an end goal of greater freedom or liberty in mind and be able, in theory, to articulate how foot-dragging achieves that goal? If not, then does Scott’s idea of “infrapolitics” differ in any important way from bodily fatigue, daydreaming, or other experiences that are parts of daily life but that we seldom deem political?

Scott so far has chosen not to delve into debates about the demographic scale of infrapolitics, about the necessity of premeditation for infrapolitics, or about the relationships between infrapolitics and more visible types of politics. This is partly because he prefers to give others the space to develop their own understandings of the term and its possible uses, a response that accords with his self-proclaimed anarchistic sympathies. As he puts it: “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.” Moreover, “I could not ‘police’ the exotic uses of the term ‘infrapolitics’ if I wanted to, and I definitely do not want to.”[[14]](#footnote-14)

Although Scott has avoided entering such definitional debates, he has added a wrinkle or two to his concept by distinguishing at least two subtypes of infrapolitics. Both depart from a way of apprehending reality that he calls “seeing like a state.” The modern state, Scott contends, is not simply a policy-making machine. It also blanches from public memory out the various projects launched each day by ordinary citizens. State sponsored maps, schoolbooks, news releases, and monuments ignore local landmarks, organic folk sayings, and practical wisdom.[[15]](#footnote-15) The state wishes to expunge human experimentation from the historical record even though local, informal, and spontaneous interactions have been around for about two hundred thousand years. Writes Scott,

Until shortly before the common era, the very last 1 percent of human history, the social landscape consisted of elementary, self-governing, kinship units that might, occasionally, cooperate in hunting, feasting, skirmishing, trading, and peacemaking. It did not contain anything that one could call a state. In other words, living in the absence of state structures has been the standard human condition.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Infrared politics, when understood as counterpoints to the state’s cultural projects, denotes local, disorderly, bottom-up, unplanned human activities that the modern state wishes to eliminate in the name of efficiency and predictability.

Scott argues that when viewed historically against the rise of the modern state, infrapolitics has taken two basic forms. First, there are the atomized “weapons of the weak,” which, as we have noted, are tiny acts of defiance by solitary individuals that are never coordinated. In addition, Scott says that there are “offstage spaces” in which translocal forces of domination are absent, and in which everyday people meet and converse with no prior preconceptions about what needs to be done. To convey what he has in mind to these spaces, Scott draws upon examples in the writings of Jane Jacobs, who a half-century ago described the older neighborhoods of American cities as overflowing with broad sidewalks, unkempt parks, and chatter between business owners and passersby. In this bevy of unregulated spaces, spontaneous discussions, interactions, and promises took and still take place.

These offstage spaces are not formal political institutions that can make enforceable policies and in which spokespersons for different interests troll the hallways. Still, these spaces are, claimed Jacobs (and now claims Scott), homes for freedom. They are places where one could momentarily drop one’s guard, and where human creativity and autonomy thereby could flourish. The crowded, smelly districts of cities are places where one could think imaginatively and talk among equals, unlike the impersonal vision and the authoritarian and unilateral spirit of the state. And in these unsupervised gardens of unplanned meetings, mutuality, and innovativeness, ideas about political contestation are regularly planted as the subjugated exchange views about their pain. And then, whenever the power of authorities seems to be faltering, those subversive ideas quickly grow into more open acts of questioning, collective insubordination, and widespread defiance.[[17]](#footnote-17)

The offstage spaces that particularly fascinate Scott are those without separate roles of leaders and followers. In such spaces, individuals speak candidly about their unhappiness, swap stories of their small-scale bad behavior, and fantasize about an alternative social order. Participants seldom reveal their intimate exchanges with outsiders. Still, the existence of “hidden transcripts” is evident whenever the unity of elites cracks. Then waves of disorganized, local-level opposition appear and surprise authorities, scholars, and other outside observers, who had assumed that the oppressed were isolated and supine. According to Scott, only pre-existing hidden transcript could explain the explosion of pell-mell resistance that scholars, seeking coherence in human affairs, will label “the English Revolution” and “the Polish Solidarity Movement.”[[18]](#footnote-18)

1. Don’t Mean a Thing If It Ain’t Got That Swing

In her classic work, Jacobs nostalgically bemoaned the replacement of mixed-usage city neighborhoods with more regulated and single-used residential, business, religious, and artistic districts.[[19]](#footnote-19) She feared that opportunities for free intercourse were disappearing. At times, Scott likewise expresses worries about an overall decline in opportunities for subaltern people to meet freely without supervisors present, a disappearance of “settings where confidences might be shared.”[[20]](#footnote-20)

Interestingly, neither thinker looks at modern recreational hobbies as places for frank exchanges among the relatively powerless. More specifically, neither discusses popular music as a functional equivalent for the older city-sidewalk spaces that they find politically safe. That is not to say that they find music unimportant. Rather, they see music as having entered a period of decline, in which it no longer stirs the soul, inspires boldness, or fosters hope. For them music has become mechanical in its production and sound, regulated by the state (for example, through musical curriculum at schools), commercially packaged, and, therefore, is yet another way those in positions of authority seek to control everyday people.[[21]](#footnote-21)

But, maybe they have reached these dreary conclusions about the decline of off-stage spaces because they describe music abstractly, as primarily a physiologically passive experience of hearing sounds or decoding lyrics in isolation, or because they reduce music to commerce, the production, marketing, and selling of audio trinkets for money. They do not think about music from what Clifford Geertz once called the perspective of “thick description” – that is, as a series of social rituals, of bodies in motion, and of costumes and masks through which subordinated people can explore and challenge different visions of equality and inequality. Or, to paraphrase Karl Marx, they do not think of music in terms of sensuous experience, which includes the creation and reorganization of social space.[[22]](#footnote-22)

As Michael Denning has noted, popular music in the twentieth century underwent a profound transformation thanks to changes in technology. The evolution of global trade and development of steamships during the late nineteenth century fostered international port cities, where laborers from different corners of the world came in contact with each other, heard each other’s music, and cavorted side-by-side in taverns and dancehalls.[[23]](#footnote-23) Meanwhile, itinerant musicians melded sounds, instruments, and rhythms to find work with different populations in the harbor towns. The result, says Denning, was hybrid music that sounded both familiar and exotic, that caused the listener to recall past harmonic, chordal changes, and tonal patterns and to enjoy the thrill of an unexpected twist.

This eerily syncopated, nontraditional sound – which later would be labelled “jazz” – prompted a new way of listening to music that was inclusive, imaginative, and quite different from the way formally conducted music was being played and received in opera houses, concert halls, and other venues frequented by the wealthier and more privileged members of high society. In Denning’s phraseology, which is based in turn on Marx’s musings in the *1844 Manuscript*s about human senses, the animalistic ear, which had been viewed as a passive receiver of sensory pulses, was being re-experienced as a means for discerning human ingenuity and energy, as a “human ear.” The odd beats and polyrhythmic quality of hybrid music fostered a sense of playfulness in listeners and made them more aware of the possibilities for innovation and improvisation.[[24]](#footnote-24) No longer was music understood as virtuosity in the accurate translation of notes on sheets (the “music”) into sound, as if music existed apart from human beings. Now, the uniqueness and creativity of each performer and each performance became central to the musical experience.

Denning and other scholars of popular culture, such as Glenn Altschuler and Leerom Medovol, have noted that in the United States, the emergence and evolution of jazz as a self-conscious and definable art form overlapped with the emergence of recording devices, juke boxes, inexpensive record players, commercial radio broadcasting, and, much later, television broadcasting.[[25]](#footnote-25) This meant that the unusual music bubbling along international trade routes was finding its way inland in the United States and into the homes of people with modest means. Moreover, because of electronic amplification, the sound was become louder, one of the traits which separated rock ’n’ roll from many fast-paced, back-beat musical precursors. The brightly colored electric guitar was a defining prop and tool in this emerging art form. In the words of James Miller, “Powerful, flashy, unspeakably loud, a handy tool for those with little in the way of previous musical experience, the guitar became the archetypal weapon in rock’s attack on the decorum and orderliness of previous forms of fine music, profaning its empire of well-tempered tones and refined artistry, and allow a new spirit—of deliberate musical brutishness—to ring in listeners’ ears.”[[26]](#footnote-26)

Technology not only was producing a new sound; it was transforming the continent’s working classes. Although the growing prosperity of the twentieth century brought labor-saving conveniences and material pleasures within reach of an unprecedentedly large part of the world’s population, many a young adult looked worriedly upon a future of assembly-work, routinized office duties, and 8-to-5 obedience. There was growing suspicion that school, the comfort of middle-income homes, and the generosity of employers were flowers masking chains of repetitive labor. This, say musical sociologists, explains the popularity of a rock ’n’ roll’s distinctively defiant and rebellious lyrics. The wordsmiths openly ridiculed the status quo and fantasized about the absence about daily regimentation. Late at night and in the privacy of one’s bedroom a nervous teen or young adult could hear over a transistor radio open denouncements of formal education in Chuck Berry’s “School Days,” warnings about the pain of steady work in Lee Dorsey’s “Working in a Coal Mine,” critiques of myriad forms of authority in Eddie Cochran’s “Summertime Blues,” and celebrations of unrestrained energy in Jerry Lee Lewis’ “Great Balls of Fire.” Meanwhile, the performers of these songs, such as Jerry Lee Lewis and Little Richard, hollered and moved crazily on stages and screens. In short, the values of rock ‘’n’ roll were not middle-class frugality, self-sacrifice, or obedience, but raw vitality. To quote George Lipsitz, the new music expressed faith that “the repressions of the industrial workplace could be challenged by the uninhibited passions of love and play.”[[27]](#footnote-27)

Several scholars have noted that a constellation of forces attempting to contain the outrageous and offensive rock sound. Morally stodgy artists, such as Pat Boone, released less raucous versions of such lascivious songs as Tutti-Frutti. Upwardly mobile composers and entrepreneurs, such as Berry Gordy (the founder of Motown Records), composed sweeter songs about monogamous romance and fidelity because they predicted, correctly, such would sell more records among affluent, suburban white teens. Government officials banned certain overly sexual tunes over the airwaves and banned rocking movies and concerts known for promoting Dionysian revelry. Consequently, in many social circles troublesome and leering rockers were pushed aside by tamer, softer, teenybopper music that monopolized the song lists of radio stations with top-40 formats.[[28]](#footnote-28)

However, the anarchistic music persisted in bedroom parties for teenagers, in neighborhood bars for drinking-age youths, and on modified music stages at stadiums and in large theaters. At these places, performers and spectators alike play-acted. They tried on passionate Dionysian roles, behaved recklessly, and symbolically rejected of authority by ritualistically storming stages, singing loudly, and dancing in the aisles during the artists’ performances. Black leather jackets, snarling poses, and outrageous colors were all part of the rock scene, which offered ample opportunity to scream, boogie, and toss inhibitions aside. It was a profoundly active form of listening that chamber music and concert halls, with their sedate norms, would not allow.[[29]](#footnote-29)

The artist Bruce Springsteen goes a step further in explaining the cultural characteristics of rock ’n’ roll. He argues in interviews (as well as in his musical compositions, such as “Mary’s Place” and “Tenth Avenue Freeze-Out”) that in smaller venues for hearing rock ’n’ roll – such as neighborhood taverns, dance clubs, and block parties – strangers began to spontaneously meet and share their previously private hopes for freedom through conversation and unruly dance steps. The gaiety and prancing amid loud, polyrhythmic sounds allow people to let their guards down and celebrate behavioral idiosyncrasies and flows of unregulated energy. In these spatially distinct sonic spots, he claims, a sense of non-hierarchical community is born and mutual trust, common interests, and emotional support spontaneously evolve. Springsteen reasons that from these local social circles more calculated collective actions can arise, which may save America from its growing alienation and defeatism. To quote Springsteen,

The core of rock music was cathartic. There was some fundamental catharsis that occurred in “Louie, Louie.” That lives on, that pursuit. Its very nature was to get people “in touch” with themselves and with each other in some fashion….There are very real communities that were built up around that notion—the very real community of your local club on Saturday night. The importance of bar bands all across America is that they nourish and inspire that community.[[30]](#footnote-30)

In other words, rock ’n’ roll was offering something akin to what Scott calls off-stage settings. Stadiums, dance clubs, and private parties places where those who are stuck in subordinate roles can temporarily escape their overseers, can commiserate with peers, and share dreams about a less fettered existence. Rock music is not simply a physically distinct sound, nor is it entertainment that soothes the soul of unhappy individuals. It is a social setting that offers a small space of freedom to oppressed and marginalized members of society. Rock music is the sort of non-hierarchical, spontaneous non-supervised experiences that Scott has in mind in his discussions off-stage spaces.

1. Remaining Questions

If, for the sake of argument, we accept that rock ’n’ roll is a musical genre that involves the creation of unmonitored spaces for rebellious expression, akin to off-stage spaces, then what does this empirical illustration suggest about Scott’s vision of infrapolitics?

First of all, it suggests that Scott’s broader historical vision may be overly pessimistic. The worries of Scott, Jacobs, and other clarions about the triumph of authoritarianism and the decline, if not disappearance, of spontaneity in modern society seem less pressing. It is possible that, thanks to science and technology, cityscapes have become more streamlined, rationalized, and regulated over the past century. Musicscapes, however, have become more pluralistic, outrageous, and rebellious. To avoid fatalism (as well as to negate silly optimism), it is necessary to see both the order-producing and disorder-producing consequences of science and technology, and to imagine “space” not only in terms of physical geography, but also in terms of social rituals.

Second, the example of rock ’n’ roll points to an element of fantasy in Scott’s contrast between visible politics, in which inequality, subordination, and coercion prevail, and infrapolitics, in which hierarchy, oppression, and asymmetrical power allegedly are absent.

As innumerable scholars who are ambivalent about rock have noted, rock music, regardless of the subgenre is rockabilly or punk, promotes wild behavior and bravado. But the music, understood as social ritual, also reinforces certain patterns of inequality as well as conventional standards of superiority and inferiority. Rock while defiant in its poses, also has primarily been a male-centered and heterosexual culture in terms of its theatrical roles, lyrical narratives, and audience responses.[[31]](#footnote-31) Especially during the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, women in songs were usually depicted spiritually as “angels” and physically as “babes” who, ideally, would help the rowdy males survive. And, whenever the music was performed live, the gender segregation implicit in the lyrics was made visible. To borrow a pithy statement coined by Altschuler: “Women had a place in rock ‘’n’ roll—in the audience.”[[32]](#footnote-32)

The exclusionary nature of rock culture is further revealed by the local, decentralized nature of its happenings and events. It is a highly diffused system of art production and consumption. Few, if any, of the countless private parties, neighborhood dance clubs, and musical gatherings on street corners are entirely unregulated spaces. Each local gathering has boundaries with regard to who can participate and what they can say (think of biker bars, or Irish pubs, or Chicano dance floors). So it seems that rock is a mixture of bottom up inventiveness and creativity, and carefully watched relations of hierarchy and of male, white, and other types of privilege. Despite the lyrics rebuking power relations, it is a form of social interaction that is power-laden.

Might this be true of other forms of infrapolitics as well – for example, alternative reading groups, farm cooperatives, and free schools? Might all of these non-state forms of local governance contain forms of hierarchy, inequality, and privilege, which means they cannot be simply spheres of freedom? Perhaps, besides being spaces for questioning and initiatve, they are places for regimentation and subordination as well. Maybe places where you break some rules is not the same as places without rules. Maybe there are no unsupervised social spaces without some sort of authority.

Ironically, when it comes to thinking about off-stage settings, Scott abandons his normal assumptions about the ubiquity of pluralism and conflict. By mentally contrasting infrapolitics with the heavy-handed rule of high-modernism, he imagines infrapolitics to be akin to political vacuums. Purportedly, they are free of the inequalities, conspiracies, and authoritarian impulses that invariably are found in institutional forms of politics. Cunning, manipulation, half-truths, and other features of conventional power politics are absent. Instead, mutual trust and understanding spontaneously occur among those who meet. An off-stage setting is a “small social sphere where the powerless may speak freely.”[[33]](#footnote-33)

But, politics probably do not disappear in the world of rock (or probably in any off-stage setting for that matter[[34]](#footnote-34)). The question that needs to be asked, therefore, is not whether the oppressed meet alone at off-stage settings, because they surely do. The relevant question is how negotiation, threats, and reconciliation – all widely accepted features politics – take places in the off-stage settings. Do individuals and groups, as they passionately discuss personal grievances with strangers, openly acknowledge differences in their beliefs, ambitions, and interests? Do participants at an off-stage event feel that they can express disagreement and discomfort whenever they feel threatened or demeaned by the activities of others who are present? Do those who share the off-stage space launch small-scale collective actions only after frank discussions about possible collective aims, about competing priorities, about the ambiguity of current circumstances, and about necessary tradeoffs?

Even in off-stage settings, humans are driven by heterogeneous visions of what can and should be done. Interests, values, and ambitions clash. What democratically committed scholars of local politics should investigate, therefore, is how political dialogue takes place within such partially unwatched spaces, and whether those dialogical procedures encourage mutuality and respectful participation by all.

1. James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009); James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998); James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. James C. Scott, “Infrapolitics and Mobilizations: A Response by James C. Scott” *Revue Française D’Études Américaines* 2012, no. 131: 112-117; James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990); James C. Scott, *Two Cheers for Anarchism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), xx-xxi, 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Scott first made this argument about the centrality of self-protection in decisions about when and how to resist in *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1974). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Scott, *Domination and the Arts*, 196; *Seeing Like a State*, 157-61 Scott, *Two Cheers*, 90, 137-8; Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*, 293-94. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Scott, *Two Cheers*, 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. My understanding of Scott’s “infrapolitics” has benefitted greatly from other scholars’ renderings of Scott’s argument, including Asef Bayat, *Street Politics: Poor People’s Movements in Iran* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1997), 5-6; Anna Johansson and Stellan Vinthagen “Dimensions of Everyday Resistance: An Analytical Framework,” *Critical Sociology* 2016, 42(3): 417-35; Guillaume Marche, “Introduction: Why Infrapolitics Matters,” *Revue française d’études américaines* 2012, no. 131: 3-18; Timothy Mitchell, “Everyday Metaphors of Power,” *Theory and Society* 1990, 19(5): 545-577; and K. Sivaramakrishnan, “Some Intellectual Genealogies for the Concept of Everyday Resistance,” *American Anthropologist* 2005, 107(3):346-55. While I have shamelessly borrowed from these writings, I also have chosen to go my way and to phrase Scott’s arguments in my own words and images. Consequently, none of the above writers is responsible for the ways that I’ve idiosyncratically borrowed, bent, and spliced their insightful readings of Scott. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Scott, *Seeing Like a State*, 166-72. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Scott, *Seeing Like a State*, 89. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Scott, *Seeing Like a State*, 99. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Scott, *Art of Not Being Governed*; Scott, *Domination and the Arts*; Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*. In terms of his insistence on the ubiquity of the contestation of norms, Scott appears to be a typical post-Cold War ethnographic scholar. See William H. Sewell Jr., “The Concept(s) of Culture” in Sewell, ed., *Logics of History: Social Theory and Social Transformation* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 170. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Scott, *Seeing Like a State*, 77-83, 97-102; Scott, *Art of Not Being Governed*. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See, for example, Robin D. G. Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (Boston, MA: Free Press, 1994); Lisa Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria, with a New Preface* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2015); Guillaume Marche, “Espressivism and Resistance: Graffiti as an Infrapolitical Form of Protest against the War on Terror,” *Revue Française D’Études Américaines* 2012, no. 131: 78-96; Sandrine Baudry, “Reclaiming Urban Space as Resistance: The Infrapolitics of Gardening,” *Revue Française D’Études Américaines* 2012, no. 131: 32-48; Luis Alvarez, “On Race, Riots, and Infrapolitics in Wartime Los Angeles,” *Revue Française D’Études Américaines* 2012, no. 131: 19-31. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. For one attempt to apply Scott’s ideas in this way, see Aldon Morris and Naomi Braine, “Social Movements and Oppositional Consciousness” in Jane Mansbridge and Aldon Morris, eds., *Oppositional Consciousness: The Subjective Roots of Social Protest* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 20-37. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. James C. Scott, “Infrapolitics and Mobilizations: A Response by James C. Scott” *Revue Française D’Études Américaines* 2012, no. 131: 112. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Scott, *Seeing Like a State*, 1-117; Scott, *Art of Not Being Governed*, 2-13, 323-37; Scott, *Two Cheers*, 67-71. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Scott, *Art of Not Being Governed*, 3; See also Scott, *Two Cheers*, 88-96. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Scott, *Domination and the Arts*, 202-27. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Scott, *Domination and the Arts*, 222-26. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York, NY: Vintage, 1961). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Scott, *Domination and the Arts*, 123. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Scott, *Two Cheers*, 54, 71-72 [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Karl Marx, These on Feuerbach” in Robert Tucker, ed., *The Marx-Engels Reader* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 1972), 143-45. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Michael Denning, *Noise Uprising: The Audiopolitics of a World Musical Revolution* (London: Verso, 2015), 1-66; Karl Marx, “Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844,” in *Marx-Engels Reader*, 87-91. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Denning, *Noise Uprising*, 171-215. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Denning, *Noise Uprising*, 67-169; Leerom Medovol, *Rebels: Youth and the Cold War Origins of Identity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 97-101; Glenn C. Altschuler, *All Shook Up: How Rock ’n’ Roll Changed America* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2003), 37-8, 97-103. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. James Miller, *Flowers in the Dustbin: The Rise of Rock and Roll, 1947-1977* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1999), 43. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. George Lipsitz, “‘Against the Wind’: Dialogic Aspects of Rock and Roll” in Lipsitz, ed., *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), 113. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. On the partial decline of traditional rock ’n’ roll, See Alterschuler, *All Shook Up* and Miller, *Flowers in the Dustbin*; Elijah Wald, *How the Beatles Destroyed Rock ’n’ Roll: An Alternative History of American Popular Music* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. For more on the social rituals that characterize rock culture in the United States, see Simon Firth, *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music* (Cambridge, MA: Havard University Press, 1996), 249-78; Daniel Cavicchi, *Tramps Life Us: Music and Meaning among Springsteen Fans* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1998); George Lipsitz, “‘Cruising Around the Historical Bloc: Postmodernism and Popular Music in East Los Angeles” in Lipsitz, *Time Passages*, 133-60. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Bruce Springsteen interview with Will Percy, spring 1998, reprinted in Christopher Phillips and Louis P. Masur, eds., *Talk about a Dream: The Essential Interviews of Bruce Springsteen* (New York, NY: Blooomsbury Press, 2013), 230-31. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. See, Medovol, *Rebels*, 265-316; [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Altschuler, *All Shook Up*, 87. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*, 330. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Feminist theorists, such as Nancy Fraser and Francesca Polletta, are particularly good at recognizing how conflicts of interest and the tasks of consensus building occur even in the smallest of communities, such as book clubs and families. See, for example, Francesca Polletta, *Freedom Is an Endless Meeting: Democracy in American Social Movements* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2002) [↑](#footnote-ref-34)