Conflict and Sign Systems

I am convinced that if extraterrestrials landed in São Paulo tomorrow, there would be experts, journalists, and all sorts of specialists to explain to people that, really, it is not such an extraordinary thing, that the possibility had already been considered, that a special committee on the issue has long been in place, and, most important, that there is no reason to panic, because the authorities are here to take care of things.

—Félix Guattari, *Molecular Revolution in Brazil*

What semiotics are brought into play in political conflict? What meanings, stories, and signs do journalists, experts, and scholars produce? Is it an ideological battle? We will attempt to problematize these questions starting from a specific case: the 2003 labor dispute among precariously-employed French cultural workers—the "intermittents du spectacle."¹

The motto of the Coordination des Intermittents et Précaires,² "We are the experts!" raises two different kinds of question. The first concerns the nature and functions of the expert or specialist: "Who is an expert?" and "What do specialists know and what can they do?" Faced with the increase in expertise, studies, data, and statistics,
whose rise is directly proportional to the intensity of the conflict, intermittent workers have asked themselves, on the one hand, what special experience and what legitimacy the experts have that allow them to develop and build knowledge with regard to their practices. On the other hand, they have questioned what the experts “can do,” in other words, the ways in which the experts participate in decision-making and in the socioeconomic choices that bear on labor, employment, and unemployment conditions.

The second set of questions the motto raises reflect on the Coordination’s own practices: “What do we know?” and “What can we do?” In other words: What is the value and import of our experiences and our words in the production and distribution of knowledge about us? Why are our words and knowledge limited and naïve and thus disqualified while “specialist” knowledge represents “objectivity” and “universality”? What power do we have as a group, a collective, an association, to play a part in the decisions that concern us? Why is our speech institutionally termed “non-political”?

In short, the motto “We are the experts!” puts into question the composition and legitimacy of the assemblage that “knows” and the composition and legitimacy of the assemblage that “decides.” The issue can be put like this: “Why don’t we have the right to participate in the collective arrangement that problematizes and explores the possibilities our work, employment, and unemployment represent? And who has the right and the legitimacy to make decisions about our lives?”

The mobilization of intermittent workers seems to follow the two paths typical of “minority” struggles which question both the procedures of the production of democracy and the procedures of the production of knowledge. The fight against cultural-labor market reforms constitutes a critique of the knowledge produced by
institutions (the State, trade unions, business organizations, the media, the social sciences, etc.) which assert what must be taken for “true” and “false” with regard to economics, social rights, and culture. It also constitutes a critique of the procedures through which the institutions governing unemployment insurance define problems, come up with solutions, and make decisions.

The Coordination’s struggle foregrounds and contests the existence of the three transversal practices crisscrossing apparatuses of knowledge production, those of the production of democracy and of the production of communication: division, delegation, monopoly. The *division* of the population into experts and laymen, into representatives and represented, into communications professionals and the public, implies, on the one hand, the *delegation* of knowledge, power, and speech to the experts, representatives, and communication professionals; on the other hand, it ensures the centralization of and monopoly over the production of knowledge in laboratories and think tanks, the centralization of political decision-making within institutions, and the centralization of the production of public speech within media newsrooms. The production of knowledge is legitimized through agreements among specialists made behind closed doors. Political representation entails the centralization of and monopoly over decision-making such that political arrangements are made and unmade among the few. In the same way, a small number of journalists ensure a monopoly for themselves over what is said in the media and what information goes out. By way of these three main practices, which constitute techniques for controlling behavior and technologies of subjection, the roles and functions, the rights and duties, the freedoms and constraints of our societies are divvied up.

The battle waged by intermittents over speech, categories, and discourses ran up against a new strategy and new semiotic techniques:
silence the non-expert, the “citizen,” and the public by making them speak; arrange for their exclusion by making them participate; keep them at a distance by consulting them, by listening to their grievances through an army of journalists, experts, and researchers. We live in a “common world” designed by the semiotics of marketing, advertising, consumption, television, and the Internet. Access to these shared semiotics is not only not denied, it is imperative: one must join in, one must take an active part. The exclusion of the governed and the neutralization of their singular speech result from the inclusion of their form of expression within a given common semiotic space. In surveillance societies, a shortage of speech is not the problem but rather its overabundance, the consensus and conformism that its circulation presupposes and produces.

Public space is saturated with a circulation of signs, images, and words and with a proliferation of mechanisms of subjection which, while encouraging and soliciting speech and expression, prevent singular expression and neutralize heterogeneous processes of subjectivation. For singular speech to be possible, shared communication must first be interrupted, one must leave the infinite chatter of the media consensus, force ruptures in public space, just as, in order to “see,” one must remove oneself from the incessant bombardment of visual clichés. In other words, for one to exist politically and to exist at all, rather than enter the common world, the latter must be singularized, that is, one must impose existential and political differentiation by creating new cleavages, new divisions. The specificity of a common world, its singularity, and its difference, must be asserted “at a time when the leveling effects of information and social participation are every day reinforced.”

Singularity, division, and difference are not given in advance: they have to be invented and constructed.
Semiotic regimes play a strategic role in the building of this common world that they did not have, or that they had in a different way, in disciplinary societies. After *Archeology of Knowledge*, Foucault returned to the production of utterances only in his last lectures. In his lectures at the Collège de France, he briefly examines the relationship between economic control and the control of public opinion. Liberal government of society is a government of the population whose dual aspect must be taken into account. First, it is a government of the "biological" reproductive conditions of the human species (regulation of births and deaths, demographic management, regulation of production, risks, etc.); second, it is a government of the public, over public opinion. As Foucault points out, economists and publicists emerged at the same time. Since the eighteenth century, the governing of society bears on both the economy and public opinion. In this way, governmental action has extended from its biological roots in the species to the surface created by "the public." From the species to the public: therein lies an entire field of new realities and, consequently, new ways of acting on behavior and opinions in order to modify the ways of doing and saying of the governed.

Today's semiotic governmentality relies on the differential management of the public (subsequently transformed into audiences), which replaces the hegemonic management of opinion in disciplinary societies. The optimization of "semiotic" differences aims at the homogenization of subjectivity (a leveling of heterogeneity which has no precedent in human history) and takes the form of a new conformism of difference, a new consensus of plurality.

It is in this new context that intermittent workers began a struggle focused on the statements and meanings of categories of unemployment, employment, and work in a shared public space.
occupied by the semiotic regime of journalists, experts, and researchers. The categories of unemployment, employment, and work serve as so many catchphrases, so many clichés, which regulate and limit our ways of acting and thinking. The awesome assemblage of university laboratories, consulting firms, democratic institutions, and media chiefs stands as a veritable semiotic wall against which the intermittents collided.

In the conflict, signifying semiotics which mobilize consciousness and representation come into play at different levels. They put into discourse the problems important to a society and time period by constituting them as catchphrases and deploying them in worlds and universes of meaning. They then ensure the interpretation and transmission of these catchphrases and universes of meaning for more and more differentiated publics by at once giving speech to and stripping it from the governed. Finally, they make these catchphrases and worlds and universes of meanings the conditions for individuals' subjection, the conditions for their production as subjects.

Problematisation

Given that we arrive at the solutions the questions we ask "deserve," Foucault and Deleuze make determining problems one of the major stakes of politics. Dominant utterances, representations, and meanings function as a "grid" that affects our way of perceiving, feeling, and understanding. Everything that happens, everything one does and thinks, everything that one could think and do within the social and economic field, is passed through this grid of statements and meanings that makes up the horizon of interpretation and expression of the world. To call employment and unemployment "the" problem of an age means defining a framework that sets
the limits of the possible, stating what is important and perceivable, defining what is legitimate and what is not, and circumscribing forms of political action and speech. It is in this way that, for Foucault, the power to formulate questions is a power of politicization, that is, a power to introduce new objects and new subjects within the space of politics and to make them the stakes of a polemic and a struggle.\textsuperscript{6} Problematization introduces into public space not only new objects and subjects, but also "rules of action, modes of relation to the self,"\textsuperscript{7} in other words, modes of possible subjectivation. The intermittent movement, by breaking the conceptual framework of the institutional consensus between the unions, bosses, and the State, by emphasizing "new social rights" rather than "the right to work," directly attacked the "monopoly" on problematization, introducing new problems and new questions and thus completely new stakes for thought and action.

The right to problematize employment and unemployment is reserved for "social partners" alone (the "co-determination" between employers and workers). Here, as in other domains, decisions are made within institutions that have long abandoned the public sphere of political division and confrontation. The ways of evaluating and measuring deficits, costs, and investments as well as the questions relative to their import and purpose have been removed from all public problematization, from all controversy, and entrusted to specialists (economic interest groups, experts, researchers, State administrators, etc.). The institutions for mutual aid and solidarity born from workers' struggles, managed and co-managed by members' representatives (employers' and workers' unions), have long stopped promoting the "democracy of labor" or the "democracy of production." The democracy of labor and production has been transformed into the "oligarchical" power of certain union and
management players. The co-determination of French universal health care based on the Fordist model of industrial relations fails to take into account the "interests" of all these new subjects (the unemployed, precarious workers, women, the sick, handicapped, students, etc.) and neglects the new social and political divisions which neoliberal differentiation has produced since the late 1970s.

The power struggle provoked by the intermittent workers' movement created a brief opening in and disruption of this monopoly on problematization.

Moreover, the worse the "jobs" and "unemployment" "crisis" has become, the more these words have paradoxically ceased to denote realities worthy of examination and instead have changed little by little into stock phrases for thought and action, helping produce the clichés of consensus. The latter now pass for the "truths" (those of liberalism) that one is supposed to believe: If employment is unilaterally considered the right question, then it is the right solution. Thus, to raise employment, taxes on business must be reduced, to increase labor-market flexibility, the level of social protections must fall, and so forth. None of these "truths" has ever been demonstrated for the simple reason that they are indemonstrable.

The watchwords on employment and unemployment constitute the unnamable and unspeakable focal points from which the narratives and discourses of power issue, from which the possibility of speech and knowledge of those governing is born. They represent the unarticulated and inarticulatable presuppositions of discursive practices (the non-discursive focal points of enunciation). Like discourses pertaining to the "reform" of unemployment insurance, economic discourse is first of all structured by a non-discursive reality that reflects power relations, the desire for wealth, inequality, exploitation, and so on.

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The institutionalization and selection of problems and solutions operated by signifying semiotics establish an initial split between government and the governed. Those who govern have the power to define problems and formulate questions (which they term “the possibilities”) and establish in this way what is noteworthy, important, relevant, feasible, worth acting on and speaking about, whereas the freedom of expression of the governed is exercised within the limits of already codified “doing” and “saying,” both already settled by the problems and solutions of those who govern.

As Deleuze and Guattari remind us, problems and significations are always the problems and significations of the dominant reality; the communications machine of signifying semiotics exists only to produce and repeat this self-evidence. The problems and frameworks of statements and dominant significations represent real semiotic barriers to the intermittent workers’ movement. All that fails to fit within the consensual definition of employment and unemployment is literally inaudible, incommunicable, and untransmittable to journalists, experts, and researchers. As one could easily see throughout the conflict, beyond most journalists’ bad faith or intellectual poverty, the issue was not cognitive but ethico-political. Even the most open and well-informed people literally did not understand what was going on because the Coordination’s words, in order to be understood, presupposed a modification, a displacement, of the problem.

The Interpretation and Transmission of Catchphrases

With the catchphrases “employment” and “unemployment” and the consensus that results, the semiotics of journalists, experts, and researchers set in motion an enormous interpretative and narrative
machine as well as a powerful machine for subjection from which the universe of significations and sense of liberalism emerge. In the past, the exclusive privilege of the politician—namely, speech—which determines and states problems, which establishes limits on saying and doing, is today constituted at the intersection of the non-discursive practices of the market and an assemblage of statements reducible—without great exaggeration—to an assemblage of experts, scholars, and journalists. Everything that has happened, is happening, and will happen is interpreted by these three according to the “grid” of problems and statements of modern-day capitalism (jobs, growth, the market, competition, etc.).

But why in our security states does the assemblage of the journalist, the expert, and the scholar replace the politician? Why does their expertise tend to replace the space in which the political confrontation of differing perspectives once occurred? Because the contemporary democratic system functions according to the belief that there is no dispute, no dissent, possible concerning the implicit presuppositions of the social consensus. If there is agreement that the fundamental social issue is employment, the difference in opinions between the labor union (to guarantee the rights of non-executives) and business management (to guarantee the prerogatives of “human capital”) can easily be reconciled by the expert. His mediation/interpretation is largely sufficient in itself.

The pacific machinery assigning roles and functions among politician, expert, scholar, and journalist only breaks down when, as happened during the intermittents’ struggle, the consensus (on employment) is repudiated, when a political force (the associations) retracts its assent to the implicit presuppositions conveyed by the dominant catchphrases-statements and produces “another collective assemblage of enunciation” from which singular speech
can be deployed. To do so, it is not enough to “liberate” speech from the apparatuses of power; it must be constructed. That is when the networks of power are confronted with a completely new situation.

Freely drawing our inspiration from the work of Michel de Certeau, we can describe the constitution, interpretation, and transmission of catchphrases produced by the assemblage of experts, researchers, and journalists in the following way. The researcher has the task of interpreting the statements that define what is important, what is noteworthy, for society and, if needs be, to explain them using his specialized knowledge. The expert acts as a mediator and translator of this specialized knowledge in the language of political, economic, and state-administrative decision-makers. In turn, the media selects, interprets, and transmits the researcher’s and expert’s statements by reformulating them in the language of public opinion, by circulating them within the shared semiotic space among different audiences. The discourse on employment, unemployment, and work thus has its speakers, interpreters, and translators as well as its “shifters,” which ensure the coherence between different types of statements (the concepts of scholars, the judgments of experts, and the opinions of journalists) and between the apparatuses that produced them (the university, the media, the think tank, etc.).

We can slightly adjust de Certeau’s theory in asserting that the balance of power between the journalist, scholar, and expert weighs largely in favor of the first, since the media calls less and less on outside analysis (of the intellectual or expert). Indeed, scholars and experts “are thus forced to become journalists if they want to conform to the norm” of modern-day communications. With the assemblage of scholar, expert, and journalist we have a first “regime of signs” of interpretation and communication. The regime entails
certain conditions: First, that signs refer to signs indefinitely, since the discourse produced is absolutely tautological and arbitrary; second, that there are categories of specialists (researcher, expert, journalist) whose “job it is to circulate these signs, to say what they mean, to interpret them, to thereby freeze the signifier”; and third, “there must still be subjects [different audiences] who receive the message, who listen to the interpretation and obey.”9 It should not be hard to see that by way of this assemblage we are describing a metamorphosis of “pastoral power,” a new “priest” and a new “flock.” The assemblage takes the public in hand employing the semiotic technologies of a “government of souls.”

The Scholar of Conflict

The work of Pierre Michel Menger, head of research at the Centre national de la recherche scientifique, research director at the École des hautes études en sciences sociales, director of the Centre de sociologie des arts, and “specialist” in the sociology of labor and the arts, perfectly matches the description of how these assemblages function, since his work provides the media with statements ready-made to be passed along, “sound bites” perfectly adapted for governing public opinion so as to ensure the success of “reform.” On the one hand, they make intermittent employment an “exception of the job market,” and, on the other hand, permanent employment the instrument and measure of the need to regulate the “far too many” intermittent workers overwhelming cultural production. By making the category of permanent employment the goal and essence of social and economic activity, Menger sets the limits on possible and reasonable activities on the cultural job market (everything outside his framework is disqualified as naïve, irrational,
utopian, etc.). The employment policy for the cultural sector this scholar proposes poignantly shows how disciplinary apparatuses are supposed to work in a surveillance society. His most recent book is based entirely on the disciplinary distinction between normal (standard employment and unemployment) and abnormal (occasional employment and unemployment), as its title clearly indicates: *Intermittent Workers: Sociology of an Exception.*

For Menger, “just as these jobs are not ordinary, we are not dealing with ordinary joblessness [...]. The rules governing intermittent workers’ unemployment cover atypically atypical risk. But exceptional flexibility has considerable consequences.” Extraordinary unemployment and employment, atypical risks and coverage of atypical risks, exceptional flexibility—this is the language of the disciplinary “exception.” Menger wraps his arguments about the cultural sector and intermittent status in a scholar’s formalism that aims to reduce and confine the issues raised by the intermittents’ movement to the reassuring framework of the abnormal, the exceptional, and the atypical. The job policies to implement must eradicate the exceptional and reestablish the normal functioning of the job market, which provides for both the return of the entrepreneur’s function (his autonomy) and the reimposition of the employee’s (his subordination) in order to assign each their place (“their rights and duties,” in the politician’s and scholar’s jargon) within the division of labor. To put it in Durkheimian terms, a “direct and organized hierarchy” must be reestablished in a job market made unruly by behavior out of line with the norm of capital-labor relations. We know that the normal functioning of the job market is not “natural” but rather must be produced and reproduced via the continuous intervention of job policies. This is what “reform” is meant to do.
Undaunted by paradox, Menger even manages to blame intermittent employment for neoliberal policies: "There is no use condemning widespread job insecurity if we fail to realize that it is the system of intermittent employment itself that creates insecurity […]. The failure of the job market is part of the very principle of intermittent work."¹² The assertion neglects the fact that over the last thirty years insecurity has also spread to all sectors of the economy. In any case, his remarks are disproven by the reality of those working in the job market's cultural sector who are not covered by intermittent workers' unemployment insurance.¹³

In professions whose activities do not provide the rights of intermittent employment the same (but worse) phenomena of underemployment and insecurity have also emerged. Without a compensation regime like that of intermittent workers', individuals either have recourse to basic welfare benefits or must take on several jobs in order to survive. To turn Menger's viewpoint on its head, we might say that if inequality is more acute in these sectors of the cultural job market (and in every sector where discontinuous employment exists), it is precisely because of the absence of a compensation regime that accounts for the discontinuity of employment and the forms of work and training in a flexible economy. Poverty, underemployment, and enormous disparities in income are not a function of the intermittent regime but of the flexible organization of the culture industry and the way its job market functions.

What is happening here is what has already happened in other parts of the economy over the last thirty years: a policy of full employment (creating "real," stable, full-time jobs) that neglects the actual conditions of production and divides and fragments the job market by creating a growing disparity among incomes. It serves only to further differentiate, to further multiply, inequalities and thus
to create the ideal terrain for neoliberal control of the job market so that it can further install itself and extend its reach. Employment policies are subordinated to the logic of liberalism because they do no more than segment and subsequently differentiate and increase the competition between "guaranteed" and "non-guaranteed" work, between secure and insecure employment, and in this way enable the policy of "optimizing differences," of differential management of inequalities, of control of behavior on the job market.

**Unemployment and Invisible Work**

"Unemployment" plays a strategic role in neoliberal significations and narratives. Neoliberal analysis ends up at the same disciplinary distinction between normal (unemployment benefits as instituted after the war) and abnormal (unemployment benefits as used, abused, and appropriated by intermittent workers). As with all the experts of cultural-sector employment policies, Menger would like to bring the unemployment benefits whose use has been perverted by intermittent work (because the benefits finance cultural and artistic activity as well as intermittent workers' lives) back to their so-called natural function of simple coverage against the risk of job loss. But Menger, like most experts, seems to ignore that within a system of "flexible accumulation," unemployment changes meaning and function. The clear and distinct separation between employment and unemployment (unemployment as the wrong side of employment) established within a very different system of accumulation (the standardization and continuity of production and, thus, stability and continuity of employment) has transformed into an ever-narrower imbrication of periods of work, periods of unemployment, and periods of training.
When we look at the cultural sector, the first thing that jumps out is the discrepancy between labor and employment. The duration of the latter covers the duration of real work only in part. Intermittents' labor (education, apprenticeship, the circulation of knowledge and know-how, the forms of cooperation, etc.) includes periods of employment and unemployment without it being reducible to either. The time of employment only partially corresponds to the labor, education, and cooperative practices intermittents undertake. The developments are not recent but date back to the 1980s. Hence, unemployment cannot be reduced to a period without labor activity. Unemployment benefits not only cover the risk of job loss but also guarantee income continuity, serving to produce and reproduce the overlapping of all these practices and temporalities for which the worker is in this case not totally responsible as he would be in other sectors.

Menger's focus on ("cultural") employment and the type of solutions he advocates prevent him from grasping the economic changes we are now living through. Given the situation of intermittent workers, the CERC (Council for employment, incomes, and social cohesion) report on job security is completely right. For it considers the phenomena we observe among intermittent work the rule rather than the exception or an abnormality: "The straightforward split between employment and unemployment, between salaried work and free-lance work, has been replaced by a kind of 'halo' of employment, a fluid status, at once unemployed and salaried, for example, or free-lance and salaried, while the types of labor contract have multiplied (regular short-term, intermittent, or interim work contracts)." The supposed "exception" of intermittent work is becoming the rule of the salary-based system, just as the intermittent associations have been arguing since 1992. The
"ordinary" or "traditional" categories Menger would like to reestablish for the system of intermittent work hardly function even within "normal" sectors of the economy. Contrary to his assertions, the difference between intermittent unemployment and unemployment in other sectors represents a difference in degree and not in kind.

The "grand narrative" of employment (or full employment) is thus interpreted, spoken of, and staged according to two non-contradictory discursive logics: the protection of long-term salaried workers and the protection of the entrepreneur and business. The reason these discourses are not contradictory is that they condemn the system of intermittent employment but for different reasons. On the one hand, neoliberals do so because, although they exploit the system's mobility and flexibility, they do not want to pay the price for it in terms of unemployment insurance ("It kills competition," "It makes people lazy"). On the other hand, with increasing precarity, there is the risk that the continuity of income and rights that intermittent work guarantees (even partially) despite discontinuous employment could be imitated in other sectors of precarious work. Unions and the left, for their part, want nothing to do with the intermittents either, since their objective is full employment, in other words, "real jobs" for "real artists" and "real professionals" (though they leave this last part out). Intermittent work is only a last resort that must be eliminated on the way to the "stable employment" with which the unions are more comfortable.

It is not hard to understand the role the "scholar" Menger has played in the battle over discourses and signs. The theoretical concepts and interpretations of the conflict he has advanced have been picked up by the media because his discourse on employment in the cultural sector, the deficit, the necessary regulation and standardization of the "far too much," and so on, has synchronized
perfectly with the crucial moments of the intermittents' struggle and with the interpretive framework of journalists, experts, politicians, and union bosses. His concepts have provided the watchwords that circulate in the media, reinforcing and validating by way of this circulation their accuracy and staying power.

The press and, above all, radio and television feed these interpretations into the discourses and speech circulating within institutional and social networks. They select experts' statements and their content, translate them into a language for everyone, making the information both attractive and easily digestible. They are in this way active agents in its appropriation and transformation. The statements the media chose throughout the intermittents' struggle in order to channel, transmit, and anchor them in social networks, public opinion, and ordinary language are (no surprise here) those which translate those statements on employment, the law of supply and demand, and business in terms reflecting the “necessary” and “inevitable” regulation of the “too much.”

The media also chooses among statements from the intermittent workers' movement, erecting what we have called veritable “semiotic barriers” on the Coordination's demands, limiting them to claims for the protection of unemployment insurance specific to “artists.” The media barely picked up on the “spectacular” week-long occupation of the roof of the French national employers' union's headquarters. This was because the Coordination had climbed up there demanding an overhaul of the State agency on employment and, specifically, a thorough review of the unemployment system and not only that part of it relating to intermittent work, a demand far exceeding the context of a cultural and artistic exception in which journalists were happy to confine the intermittents' struggle. Although one could find in the media some sympathy for and interest
in those "artists" who fought with the determination of a bygone age, there was nonetheless a complete black-out on everything that went beyond the idea that the same media had of the functions and roles of art and artists in society. The multitude of "lay" voices expressing themselves throughout the conflict held almost no weight among the media chiefs who used them at best for man-in-the-street public opinion. For the media, a legitimate, expert voice was enough to silence the jabberers who failed to understand that if the job market is regulated, it is only for its own good.

The Narrative-Function of Signifying Semiotics

The media does more than communicate catchphrases. It actualizes them, deploys them, in worlds and universes of images, words, and signs through stories and narratives that constitute the real rather than describe it. De Certeau effectively synthesizes this new narrative-function of signifying semiotics: "The media transform the great silence of things into its opposite. Formerly constituting a secret, the real now talks constantly. News reports, information, statistics, and surveys are everywhere. No story has ever spoken so much or shown so much. [...] Narrations of what's-going-on constitute our orthodoxy. Debates about figures are our theological wars. The combatants move forward camouflaged as facts, data, and events. They present themselves as messengers of a 'reality.' [...] But in fact they fabricate [it], simulate it, use it as a mask, accredit themselves by it, and thus create the scene of their law."18 The injunction conveyed by the as-signifying semiotics of figures, statistics, and deficits is translated into a discourse that issues the command to "Be quiet!" This is what, between the lines, journalists in the press, the television host, and political representatives express with the help of
statistics and surveys: “These are the facts. Here are the data, the circumstances, etc. Therefore you must...’ Narrated reality constantly tells us what must be believed and what must be done.”

Stories and narratives actualize employment and unemployment into worlds and universes of discourse and meaning. Unemployment is at once interpreted and narrated as an illness of the social body that must be cured through employment and as the event of security societies that must be continually talked about and continually staged through the figures and statistics that call on and appeal to the speech of experts, scholars, and the unemployed themselves. And all this serves no other purpose than to internalize through the public relations machine the inequalities the economy exacerbates. “Narratives” have a conjunctive function since they compensate for the growing “disjunctures” created by the division of labor, the differential treatment instituted by public employment policies, and strategies of segmentation of the job market. While communicating fear, discourses on unemployment also promote a project for mobilizing the public for the future. Signifying semiotics produce restorative meaning by providing through employment a common frame of reference for the multiplication of “differences” (inequality of status, income, access to insurance, etc.). The common reference is meant to bind the differences together to establish a common goal. In the battle for employment, discourses, stories, and narratives produce the possibility for a reality reconciled with itself. They provide the image of the rediscovered unity of society (against social conflict), the image of security (of employment) that erases fear.

Unemployment thus allows for the unrelenting repetition of narratives that constitute individuals as victims of the market and globalization (the political and left-wing trade union version) or
as responsible for their situation because of their own behavior (the neoliberal right-wing version). But the “grand narrative” of employment does not have the same power of subjection and internalization as the story of the “nation” or “progress.” It is a little “dream” of security that requires the mobilization of the entire society for infinitesimal changes in unemployment whose calculation itself is subject to every kind of manipulation imaginable.

The Subjection Machine

Do you know what you have to do to keep someone from speaking in his or her own name? Have him say “I.”

—Gilles Deleuze, *Two Regimes of Madness*

I know very well that people in *favelas* couldn’t care less about psychoanalysis, Freud, or Lacan. But the abstract machines of subjectivation produced by psychoanalysis through the media, magazines, films, and so on, are certainly also present in what takes place in the *favelas.*

—Félix Guattari, *Molecular Revolution in Brazil*

A final function exercised by signifying semiotics has to be examined. The latter are not limited to constructing, interpreting, and transmitting catchphrases. The functioning of the semiotic machine for interpreting and transmitting them is indistinguishable from the functioning of a subjection machine. One might even say that the purpose of interpretation and transmission is the production of subjection.

In security societies a plurality of sign regimes coexist. We have already analyzed one of them, the circulation/transmission of
“statements-watchwords.” The process of subjection represents another. Here, signs no longer refer to signs within a circle closed upon itself but rather to the subject. Signs, significations, and statements do not refer to their own reproduction but to the limits of their circulation constituted by the use the subject makes of them in order to act on and for himself. It is a major failing in all of postmodern communications theory (Baudrillard, Virilio, etc.) that it restricts itself to only the first system of signs while neglecting the specificity of the process of “subjectivity production” and the relation to the self. If the latter is the source of new forms of domination, it can also be an opportunity for a radical break with the relations of power and knowledge of security societies. In this second semiotic regime, signs and their functioning are one of the conditions of the process of subjectivity production.

Deleuze and Guattari’s analysis of psychoanalysis can also help us to understand how semiotic subjection machines function. Psychoanalysis represents a process of disciplinary subjection; because of its incitement to speak, it functions as an apparatus that is able, on the one hand, to “pin” the subject-function on the body of the individual and, on the other hand, to prevent singular statements from being formulated. Psychoanalysis emerged and developed at the moment when disciplinary societies began to turn into control societies. Thus, while the psychiatric hospital is a disciplinary apparatus practicing its techniques on the bodies and mental reality of the sick within a closed space, psychoanalysis is a security apparatus exercising power through speech on the bodies and mental reality of the “sick” within an open space.

Such as it is analyzed in Anti-Oedipus, psychoanalysis invented strategies for the construction of the subject which were deployed in two principal ways: by “discrediting” the singular speech of
the individual through interpretation and, once discredited, by reconstructing it as a “civilized” subject’s speech in accordance with the behavioral model of subjects within the “family.” Everything the “patient” says is interpreted through a particular framework or a small number of utterances (papa, mama, phallus, castration, or signifier, the symbolic, or lack in the more deterritorialized Lacanian version) meant to uncover the repressed meaning of singular speech. Starting from the discrediting interpretation which relocates the origin and the sense of the utterance in the familial triangle or in the signifier, and by basing itself on the patient’s enunciation, psychoanalysis resocializes the subject by constructing him as an individual who accepts, adapts to, and identifies with the dominant model of individuation of capitalist society (the family) and its psychic apparatuses (id, ego, superego).

What interests us in Deleuze and Guattari’s work is the fact that the generalization of this apparatus of subject production is not guaranteed in completely developed security societies by psychoanalysis but rather by the “pastoral” communication and techniques of the welfare state. The functions of control over and standardization of enunciation and the functions of subjection assured by psychoanalysis (as described in Anti-Oedipus) are picked up, unified, and generalized by mass communications as a material apparatus and by linguistics and analytic philosophy as a theoretical apparatus (dealt with in part in A Thousand Plateaus). Psychoanalysis put the final touches on a series of “technologies for the construction of the subject” which in turn spread to the social sciences and today constitute in a simplified and impoverished form the ways in which the media functions.20 Focusing on television, we can sketch out a broad outline of how these security apparatuses of subjection work, apparatuses which act on and through speech by “shutting up” the
public and making it speak according to the rules of the common space of communication.

Like psychoanalysis, television functions based on a small number of already codified statements (its “grid”) about the dominant reality (in our example, this means the economic statements of the market, competition, and employment/unemployment), which it seeks to make the statements of individual subjects.

There is nothing natural about the subject-function in communications and language. On the contrary, it must be constructed and imposed. According to Deleuze and Guattari, the individuated subject is neither a condition of language nor the cause of utterances. In reality, the latter are not produced by us, as subjects, but by something else entirely: “multiplicities, masses, and mobs, peoples and tribes, collective arrangements; they cross through us, they are within us, and they remain unknown to us.”21 This multiplicity that exceeds the individual makes us speak; and it is from this multiplicity that we produce utterances. There is no subject, there are only collective assemblages of enunciation that produce utterances. “[T]he utterance [is] always collective even when it seems to be emitted by a solitary singularity like that of the artist.”22

The television machine extracts from these collective assemblages, from the multiplicity of verbal and nonverbal semiotics that traverse and constitute them, a subject of enunciation who must mold himself to a subject of utterance, in other words, a subject caught up in statements corresponding to television “reality,” and who must adapt to a fixed framework of prefabricated enunciations. Television pushes us to speak as subjects of enunciation as if we were the cause and the origin of our statements, whereas we are spoken by the communications machine of which, as subjects of utterances, we are no longer anything more than one of the effects.23
If, for example, you are interviewed on television (whether on a literary program, a talk show, or a reality show), you are instituted as a subject of enunciation and subject to a machine which takes over your speech and remotely guides your singular expression through a semiotics attaching you to the dominant utterances. As in psychoanalysis, television is able to pass off utterances that conform to the dominant reality of capitalism as the utterances of individuals by dint of interpretation (and discrediting) and subjection machines.

Television uses all the linguistic and non-linguistic, verbal and nonverbal, constituents of the enunciation. First, you fall under the control of a non-discursive machine that interprets, selects, and standardizes your attitude, movements, and expressions before you even start speaking. Television functions based on a small number of ready-made utterances as well as on a selection and imposition of nonverbal semiotics (a certain intonation, a certain length and cadence of speech, certain behavior, a certain rhythm, certain gestures, certain clothes, a certain color pattern in the design, “costumes,” a certain arrangement of the space in which you speak, a certain framing of the image, etc.). As a subject of enunciation, you are fit to a prefabricated audiovisual semiotics. Your voice, your gestures, and your intonation conform more or less amenably to codified apparatuses of expression. As soon as you open your mouth, you pass through the interpretations of the discursive machine. The journalist is but one terminal which, with the help of other terminals of the interpreting machine (the expert, the specialist), determines the possible remaining gaps between your enunciation, your subjectivation, your signification, and the utterances, the subjectivation, the significations, expected of you. Nothing unexpected ever happens on television, and if it does, even something slightly out of place, it is immediately noticed—that is
how thoroughly everything is codified. At the end of the interview, you are a subject of utterance, a subject caught in utterances in conformity with televisual logic, an effect of the semiotics of the interpretation machine, whose experience is that of a subject of enunciation, the absolute cause and origin of what is said.

With regard to psychoanalysis, Deleuze speaks of the “crushing of enunciation” by a preexisting code. This is not suffered negatively as repression but rather positively as encouragement to speak up, as a prompt to express oneself, such that the subject “has the impression of talking [...] but he will never be able to get to what he really has to say.” Try as one might, the entire interpretive and subjectivation machine “exists to suppress the conditions of real expression.”25 The more you express yourself, the more you speak, the more you become part of the interactivity of the communication machine, the more you give up what it is you have to say because the communicational apparatuses cut you off from your own collective assemblages of enunciation and connect you to other collective assemblages (television) which individualize you as a split subject, as a double subject—both the cause and effect of utterances.

Psychoanalysis experiments with techniques for controlling and producing subjectivity. By concentrating on the enunciation rather than utterances, these techniques then migrate to other domains, especially the media, management, the individual monitoring of the unemployed and welfare recipients, and so on: “While, to achieve their ends, religions act by direct suggestion, by the imprint of standardized representations and statements, at least to begin with psychoanalysis gives free reign to a certain individual expression [...] . While religion, dare I say it, straitjackets subjectivity in the open air, psychoanalysis gets rid of some of the ballast of statements in order to concentrate its efforts on remodeling enunciation. [...]
[S]o-called ‘free interpretation’ is rapidly channeled by a pitiless semiotic remote control.”

De Certeau comes to the same conclusions: the proliferation of statements, messages, and signs prevents the conditions for a singular enunciation from emerging. The continuous drone, the incessant circulation of words and signs from the common semiotically standardized world, “create an absence of speech.” Public space, saturated with signs, communications and discourse apparatuses, makes it impossible for people to form an enunciation that might be called their own. In order to articulate a “real” enunciation that re-singularizes a “shared semiotics” which has the capacity to create new rifts, “polemical” points of view with which we might express ourselves, we must interrupt the circulation of the languages, signs, and media semiotics meant for “everyone, but true for no one.”

All the apparatuses of enunciation in our security states (surveys, marketing, elections, union and political representation, etc.) are, on the one hand, more or less sophisticated variations of the independent and responsible speech production of the “individuated subject” (“human capital”) and, on the other hand, refashionings of the creative/destructive process of its “free speech.” As a voter, you are called on to express your opinion and to exercise your freedom of choice as a subject of enunciation; however, at the same time, you are spoken for as a subject of utterance, since your free expression is limited to choosing between possibilities that have already been codified by others, between alternatives (“right” and “left”) that prevent you from exercising the power of problematization. Am I being asked the right question? Does it concern me? Is it really important to me? For a long time now voters have answered “no”; they abstain or they vote to eliminate the least worst choice others have already made. If a small gap remains between your enunciation and that
which is expected of you, opinion polls are there to steer you in the right direction.  

With the proliferation of opinion polls, your voting decision ends up fitting into prefabricated molds, not instantaneously (during the election) but over time. In the same way, marketing and advertising provide daily training in the choice to make between alternatives set and offered by the market and business. Elections, marketing, and advertising mutually reflect and reinforce each other. Like opinion polls, like marketing and union and political representation, elections presuppose prior consensus and agreement on problems and issues. Given this, it is understandable why the communications machine might function as a huge collective psychoanalysis. It translates what you say into another language, it shifts the origin and the sense of your words and explains to you your true utterances and actual desires (by giving them voice), which businesses can then plug into.

Television perfectly exemplifies how security apparatuses of power function in the way that Foucault describes, since it assures the governmentality of souls through the production of “freedom” (of speech and expression). Free speech is not a natural given one needs only to respect and protect. It is a correlate of the apparatus of power which must be produced and reproduced. The art of governing has “the function of producing, breathing life into, and increasing freedom” but through “additional control and intervention.” It is necessary, Foucault says, to “produce freedom, but this very act entails the establishment of limitations, controls, forms of coercion, and obligations relying on threats.” Security apparatuses at once produce and destroy freedom. The freedom they produce is one of enunciations and expressions codified and homogenized by the media. The freedom they
destroy is that of inventing, creating, experimenting with singular forms of expression and speech.

On the rare occasions when activist groups have been invited to televised debates, we see how the subjection machine works. The "freedom of speech" and expression exercised within such strictly codified limits and conditions transforms into an injunction to conform speech to the prefabricated models of communication, to shape activists' statements to fit the template of statements and forms of thought of the journalists and experts with whom they are often faced.

For media to work, it needs individuals to accept, actively or passively, their implicit presuppositions, their forms of enunciation, and codes of expression. If this does not happen, as with an intermittent association member during a live interview on French television, the interviewer immediately senses the threat of alterity and, although usually calm and civilized with guests who accept the implicit presuppositions of televisual enunciation, he goes stiff, displaying a verbal aggressiveness and violence that betrays his fear of a non-preprogrammed broadcast. Because what frighten the members of the media are events they do not create themselves. They must immediately translate everything that happens into their own vocabulary. That is why, when confronted with a "real" event like the intermittent movement, the media's first objective is to isolate the person speaking from the connections that make up his collective assemblage (assemblies, collective action, the Coordination) and force a spokesperson, a representative, a leader, out of him, someone who both speaks for the others and expresses himself according to the media's codes, temporalities, and syntactical and lexical constraints (he will then, according to journalists, be "understood" to the public). The media is composed of apparatuses
conceived and constructed to be always “at home” in the “common world” of democratic speech and expression, whatever happens and wherever they appear. During one of the intermittent workers’ collective actions, for example—the occupation of a television news program—intermittents demanded the “right to blunder” when communicating, in other words, they refused the media codes governing speech and expression and refused to be caught in the apparatuses of subjection, to allow themselves to be cut off from their own assemblage. In this way, they revealed the conditions in which singular speech can be spoken.

The communications machine is thus a selection machine, implicitly following the same rules as those of co-determination, which sets limits on political and union representation and therefore on legitimate speech. If one wants to have a spot between “legitimate” representatives and the mere man-on-the-street the media normally welcomes in order to mask its flagrant lack of “reality,” one has to make a lot of noise or make oneself known through “unruly” activity to be on the news. In any case, inevitably this will still not be enough since the media can only communicate within the limits of the “issues” it has defined in advance.

The political task before us is to discover, deploy, and give consistency to collective logics, to the people who are in us and who make us speak and thanks to whom we produce utterances.

This is what Deleuze and Guattari have in mind when they set “a whole field of experimentation, of personal and group experimentation” against both psychoanalysis and traditional political organizations.32