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“Semiotic Pluralism” and the New Government of Signs

Homage to Félix Guattari

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For Félix Guattari, capital is far more than a simple economic category relating to the circulation of goods and the accumulation of wealth. It is a semiotic category that affects all levels of production and all levels of the stratification of power. According to a definition dating from the 70s, Capital is a “semantic operator”.

The semiotic components of capital always operate in a dual register. The first is the register of “representation” and “signification” or “production of meaning”, both of which are organized by signifying semiotics (language) with the purpose of producing the “subject”, the “individual”, the “I”. The second is the machinic register organized by a-signifying semiotics (such as money, analog or digital machines that produce images, sounds and information, the equations, functions, diagrams of science, music, etc.), which “can bring into play signs which have an additional symbolic or signifying effect, but whose actual functioning is

neither symbolic nor signifying". This second register is not aimed at subject constitution but at capturing and activating pre-subjective and pre-individual elements (affects, emotions, perceptions) to make them function like components or cogs in the semiotic machine of capital.

The functions of social subjection and subjective alienation of signifying semiotics

The capitalist system, through representation and signification, creates and allocates roles and functions. It provides us with a subjectivity and assigns us to a specific process of individuation (via categories such as identity, gender, profession, nationality, etc.) so that everyone is implicated in a semiotic trap that is both signifying and representative. The operation of "social subjection" on established identities and roles ("rationalist, capitalist subjectivity") is routed through the subordination of the multiplicity and heterogeneity of pre-signifying or symbolic semiotics in language and its representative and signifying functions.

The symbolic semiotics of the *body* – (i.e. any iconic means of pre-verbal, physical expression – dance, mime, music, a somatization disorder, nervous breakdown, a fit of tears, intensities, movements, rhythms, etc.) – depend neither on *signifying language nor on consciousness*. They do not involve a clearly identifiable speaker or a listener which are typical of the communicational and linguistic model; speech does not have a primary role here. These semiotics are driven by affects and give rise to relations that are difficult to assign to a single subject, to a 'me', to an individual. They go beyond the subjective *individualizing* limits (of people, their identities, roles and social functions) within which language seeks to confine and to which it tries to reduce them. The "message"

does not pass through linguistic chains but via the body, postures, noises, images, mimicry, intensities, movement, rhythm, etc. According to Guattari, the use of signifying semiotics has the following consequences: "This pathic [affective M.L.] subjectivation, at the root of all modes of subjectivation, is overshadowed [...] which tends to systematically circumvent it."

Folding these modes of expression over signifying semiotics is a political process since, on the one hand, the "appropriation of meaning is always an appropriation of power" and, on the other, there can be no meaning or representation independent of the dominant significations and representations. The power to act of linguistic and non-linguistic signs must bend to the logic of representation and signification, which neutralize and repress all other functions of language and signs. There is a claim shared by both the capitalist logic of disciplinary societies and the logic of socialism and communism: the relationship with the real has to be mediated. Without signification and without representation, there is no access to the real. In the tradition of the workers' movement, politics is not possible without "realization" (signification) and without "representation" of the people or of the working class by the "party". The ties between semiotics and politics, between the government of signs and the government of the political arena are very close indeed.

The functions of machinic enslavement of a-signifying semiotics

Guattari's concept of social subjection tallies in several areas with the concept of "government by individualization" which, according to Foucault, characterizes the disciplinary society. The functions of "machinic enslavement" however do not have corresponding concepts in either political or linguistic theory, and they represent

one of the fundamental contributions by Deleuze and Guattari to our understanding of contemporary societies.

The machinic register of the semiotic production of Capital operates on the basis of a-signifying semiotics that tune in directly to the body (to its affects, its desires, its emotions and perceptions) by means of signs. Instead of producing signification, these signs trigger an action, a reaction, a behaviour, an attitude, a posture. These semiotics have no meaning, but set things in motion, activate them. Money, television, science, music, etc. can function as sign production machines, which have a direct, unmediated impact on the real and on the body without being routed through a signification or a representation. The cycle of fear, anxiety or panic penetrating the atmosphere and tonality in which our "surveillance societies" are steeped are triggered by sign machines; these machines appeal not to the consciousness, but to the nervous system, the affects, the emotions. The symbolic semiotics of the body, instead of being centred on language, are as such activity routed through the industrial, machinic, non-human production of images, sounds, words, intensities, movements, rhythms, etc.

If signifying semiotics have a function of subjective alienation, of "social subjection", a-signifying semiotics have one of "machinic enslavement". A-signifying semiotics synchronize and modulate the pre-individual and pre-verbal elements of subjectivity by causing the affects, perceptions, emotions, etc. to function like component parts, like the elements in a machine (machinic enslavement). We can all function like the input/output elements in semiotic machines, like simple relays of television or the Internet that facilitate or block the transmission of information, communication or affects. Unlike signifying semiotics, a-signifying semiotics recognize neither persons, roles nor subjects. While subjection concerns the global person, those highly manipulable subjective,

molar representations, “machinic enslavement connects infrapersonal, infrasocial elements thanks to a molecular economy of desire”. The power of these semiotics resides in the fact that they permeate the systems of representation and signification by which “individuated subjects recognize each other and are alienated from each other”.

Machinic enslavement is therefore not the same thing as social subjection. If the latter appeals to the molar, individuated dimension of the subjectivity, the former activates its molecular, pre-individual, transindividual dimension. In the first case, the system speaks and generates speech; it indexes and folds the multiplicity of pre-signifying and symbolic semiotics over language, over linguistic chains by giving priority to its representative functions. In the second case, however, the system does not generate discourse: it does not speak but it functions, sets things in motion, by connecting directly to the “nervous system, the brain, the memory, etc.” and activate the affective, transitivist, transindividual relations that are difficult to attribute to a subject, an individual, a me. These two semiotic registers work together to produce and control subjectivity in both its *molar* and its *molecular* dimensions. As we shall see, the same semiotic devices can be devices both for machinic enslavement and for social subjection. (Television, for example, can constitute us as a subject, as a user or it can even use us as simple relays for transmitting information, a message or signs which trigger an action-reaction sequence!) We have the privilege of being subjected simultaneously to the effects of both.

The valorisation of symbolic or pre-signifying semiotics and the affirmation of their creativity and their power to act, (phenomena which are independent of language), accompanied and supported the political affirmation of minorities in the 60s and 70s. These

subjects and modes of expression are in fact those of minorities: of women, children, the insane, the sick, of sexual, linguistic and social minorities. In reality, the issue is one of the semiotics and modes of expression of "everybody", since we are dealing with the semiotics and modes of expression of the body. Semiotic pluralism is a key element in Deleuze and Guattari's critique of the "majority" subjectivity of capitalist societies.

In these conditions, Guattari's political problem is how to clearly distinguish "a politics of signification" from "a politics of expression" that would also constitute a politics of "experimentation". It is something of an ungrateful task given that the entire history of the workers' movement, in particular its Marxist component, has used processes of subjectivation totally attuned to the politics of signification and representation of disciplinary societies (where the relationship to the real must be mediated by consciousness and representation).

A-signifying semiotics

The importance of a-signifying semiotics (money, machinic devices for the production of images, sounds, words, signs, equations, scientific formulae, music, etc.) and the role they play needs to be emphasized. They are ignored by most linguistic and political theories even though they constitute the pivotal point of new forms of capitalist government. It is because of them that a new distribution of discursive and non-discursive is being established.

Linguistic theories and analytical philosophy fail to understand the existence of these semiotics and how they operate; they assume that the production and circulation of signs and words is an essentially human affair, one of semiotic "exchange" between

humans. They employ a logocentric conception of enunciation whereas a growing proportion of enunciations and circulating signs are being produced and shaped by machinic devices (television, cinema, radio, Internet, etc.). Here, the enunciation is still territorialized and logocentric, whereas capitalism is characterized by a deterritorialized, machinocentric enunciation. Media and telecommunications stand in for what was formerly a relationship of "oral and written", by configuring new (individual and collective) arrangements of enunciation.

The theories that attribute the greatest importance to speech and language or that regard them as the only viable form of political expression (Arendt, Rancière, Virno) appear to underestimate a-signifying semiotics just as seriously, since the process of subjectivation (Rancière) or of individuation (Virno) occurs in a public arena conceived as a theatrical stage where political subjects, imitating the performance of an artist or an orator before an audience, are constituted in their molar or representative dimension. The theatrical metaphor seems to me to be particularly harmful as a way of understanding the contemporary political arena. (Walter Benjamin wrote about this new technology: "Parliaments, as much as theaters, are deserted.")

The process of subjectivation or individuation is therefore gravely distorted because the a-signifying semiotics and machines redraw and completely reconfigure the public space and its modes of expression by directly and profoundly affecting the "political word". Language's power to act, as exercised in the Greek *polis* and an assumption still implicit in all these theories since Hannah Arendt, is no longer sufficient to describe the "political word". In the contemporary public arena, the production of the word is organized "industrially" rather than "theatrically". The process of subjectivation or of individuation cannot be reduced to "social

subjection" by completely skipping all reference to "machinic enslavement". Paradoxically enough, all the contemporary political and linguistic theories that refer either directly or indirectly to the *polis* and/or to the theatre, place us in a pre-capitalist situation.

The video as whatever flow

According to Deleuze and Guattari, it is only with the emergence of the technical means of expression corresponding to the generalized decoding of the flows that characterize capitalism that the capitalist use of language is actualized and becomes concrete. The electric flow may be considered as the actualization of such a flow. Instead of symbols or meaning, the electric flow produces point-signs without signification that generate flows of images, sounds and words that have the potential to take on meaning. The electric flow as such is indifferent to its products. Bill Viola, a video artist, gives us a description of how this a-signifying flow operates: "The video image is a pattern of stationary waves of electric energy, a vibratory system composed of specific frequencies such as those you might expect to find in any sound object."

How does one move from the frequencies and amplitudes of electric waves (signs without signification) to images, sounds and words that carry meaning? By modulation. To make sense of the concept of modulation employed by Deleuze to explain the device of power in a control society and which he contrasts with the "moulding" of the disciplinary society, we have to look at the video machine. Television is a device that modulates the (message-bearing) carrier wave by acting simultaneously on its amplitude and its frequency. Rather than capturing the images, the camera captures the waves that constitute those images, composing and decomposing them by means of modulation. The production and

transmission of an image is in reality the result of a modulation of vibrations, of electric waves, of "visual dust", to use Bergson's beautiful image.

So we have an *abstract* and *non-figurative* line (a wave), an analogical flow of electric waves that vibrate like a sound object, and a modulation device (a TV, radio, computer) that tunes in directly to the analogical fluxes by producing figures, words, sounds. The modulation is a modulation of the movements, flows, intensities, vibrations, rhythms of a world before man (a world before the image as we perceive it, a world before sound as we hear it, a world before speech as we articulate it). A world of "pure experience", before the crystallization of object and subject. A non-"human" world, since it goes beyond our ability to perceive these movements, these intensities, these rhythms. All is movement in the video, all is time – but these movements, this time is non-"human". "The division into lines and frames are purely divisions in time: the openings and closings of temporal windows that demarcate periods of activity within an electronic flow. So the video image is a living, dynamic energy field, a vibration that takes on the appearance of solidity only because it exceeds our capacity to detect such minute intervals of time." (Bill Viola)

By modulating these intensities, these rhythms, these movements, the a-signifying machines shape the conditions from which the image, the word or the sound emerges, i.e. the conditions from which the action, the perception or the enunciation emerges. That is the source of their power: they work on all the elements within the process of subjectivation (both linguistic and symbolic), but their point of departure is this "vacuum", which actually and rightly precedes all signification and representation. They permeate the whole range of modes of expression, both molar and molecular.

Money

What interests us in this context is the relationship between the abstract, non-figurative line and the production of a figure because, in capitalism, money operates in exactly the same way. Investment capital, money as capital, is a flow that is indifferent to any substance, any matter, any subject. It is a totally abstract, non-figurative flow that can generate any figure (any production). In monetary flows, it is the banking system that modulates this abstract and non-figurative flow. The banking device, by modulating the frequency and the amplitude of investment, can generate any figure/production. The banking system converts the abstract line of money as capital into money as cash, as a means of payment.

The money circulating in the banks, which is recorded in company balance sheets, is by no means the same as the money we have in our pockets or that we receive as salaries or benefits. These two types of money – exchange money and credit money – belong to two different regimes of power. What we call "purchasing power" is in reality a lack of power. What we have are monetary signs that are powerless because they represent no more than a possible debiting from a flow of consumption determined by the flows of credit, that abstract line of money as capital. What it amounts to is "cosmic fraud".

In contrast, credit money (the abstract, non-figurative line) has the power to restructure the economic chains, to determine a displacement of the figures, to influence the creation of possibles. Investment capital is capable of a direct, unmediated impact on the real because, as we know, it recognizes neither subjects nor objects, it is routed through signification and representations.

The technologies of the mind *

The contents of a subjectivity in a control society depend on a multitude of machinic systems. A review of the most basic, unremarkable gestures and activities which we, living in the developed West, carry out in our daily lives is all that is required to describe this "entering into the machine of subjectivity". At one time, people used to talk about "entering religious life" in similar terms.

I get up in the morning and the first thing I do is switch on the light by activating a technological device that corresponds to the generalized decoding of a flow peculiar to capitalism. It is a kind of flow that is indifferent to all products and all actualization but, being composed of point-signs without signification, will return and set in motion all the other technological devices that I am going to activate during the day.

While I am having my breakfast, I listen to the radio. The usual spatial and temporal dimensions of my sound world are suspended. The usual sensory-motor patterns on which the perception of sound is based are neutralized. Voice, speech and sound are deterritorialized since they have lost all connection with a body, a place, a context, a territory. Radio broadcasting does not render "the direction, the limits and the structure of the sphere of the enunciation but only the connections between sound intensities" (Serge Cardinal). The "radio doesn't capture sound fragments as tangible qualities relating to an object, but rather as an unlimited series of modes, of passive and active forces of affection". "Sound is composed of elementary forces (intensities, pitch, interval, rhythm and tempo) that have a more direct impact on people than the meaning of words: that is the very basis of the

art of radio", according to Arnheim (cited in Cardinal). But that too is the basis of government in control societies.

Before going out, I make a phone call to let someone know that I'll be half an hour late. Where does communication take place? At home? At the home of the person I have just phoned? In the telecommunications device? What is the context for this enunciation?

In the street, I withdraw money from a cash machine where an electric, computational, telematic device, emitting only point-signs without signification, satisfies my request by giving me access to monetary signs which I then put in my pocket. These signs represent a flow of purchasing power that, as we know, has no power in reality other than that of being exchanged for other goods-signs, which are openly displayed in the passage in the subway that I have to take. The ticket machine is a system of regulation and control that is devoid of meaning but that can produce signification because it constantly reminds me of the balance of my powerless signs and it continually modulates my need to work.

Before going into the subway, I buy a newspaper. Reading the daily paper, I am confronted by the capitalist specificity of the writing and by another machine of signs and information. In this context, let us quote Gabriel Tarde who, at the end of the 19th century, had already stressed how different this mode of "mute" enunciation was when compared with the model of the Greek *polis*: "The Greek political orators composed speeches to be delivered within a very short time frame, in a space which never exceeded the range of the human voice", before a small group of individuals who were "removed momentarily from all other surrounding influences", [the

speech itself being] composed by the orator in a "similar frame of mind."

The task of the newspaper appears to be completely different. "The newspaper targets a far wider but more dispersed audience made up of individuals who, while they are reading their article, remain subject to all sorts of distractions. They can hear the buzz of conversation around them in their groups or in their cafe. They can hear ideas that run counter to those of the writer." Newspaper readers, like radio listeners, never see the writer or his/her gestures or facial expressions and, unlike radio listeners, they don't hear his/her voice or intonation either. In contrast to the orator who can make a lasting impression on the minds of his audience with only one speech, several articles are required to achieve the same result since "the article is only one link in a chain of articles generally emanating from a number of different writers who make up the newspaper's editorial board".

Since the French Revolution, the very long and complex "silent, appealed discourse" has been leading our democracies. A newspaper's greatest difficulty is to build up an audience/readership and then keep it; its audience cannot be created and retained by using a body of coherent ideas and deploying well-structured arguments, both of which are available to an orator using rhetoric. "The subject of the newspaper is composed of numerous, incoherent subjects, which are supplied every morning by the big event of the day or of the previous day. Imagine if couriers had constantly come up to Demosthenes during one of his harangues against Philip to bring him some piece of breaking news and then his speech was entirely structured around the narration or interpretation of all this information."

On my return home, I watch the news on TV, along with eight million other French people. We form a huge neural network, a network of bodies and souls, affects, emotions, passions, all simultaneously synchronized. We form a huge nervous system exposed to the slogans and watchwords of power. Who is speaking from the TV set and who is speaking to whom? The talking head is only the terminal in an "industrial" arrangement producing the enunciation; the editorial board, journalists, freelances, contract workers are only component parts in this arrangement (and not necessarily the most important in the chain of production). The presenter's voice is a "polyphony", but not a pleasant one. It echoes the voices of the governments in power, of advertisers, of other print and electronic media and of CEOs whose "cultural" project consists of dispensing with the need for brains in corporate marketing departments.

In every house, each of the eight million viewers finds himself/herself too at the centre of an arrangement, at the intersection of a series of flows. The ways of mobilizing attention, of organizing the programmes, of presenting the topic tally in several areas with the experience of reading a newspaper or listening to the radio. But the new elements appear to be linked to the technological specificity of the device. So, in front of my television set, I am the intersection point "1. Of a perceptual fascination provoked by the screen's luminous animation bordering on hypnotism, 2. of a relationship of capture with the narrative content of the programme combined with a lateral awareness of surrounding events (water boiling on the hob, a child's cry, the telephone ...), 3. of a world of fantasies inhabiting my daydreams ... My sense of personal identity is thus pulled in different directions." (Guattari, Chaosmosis)

Before going to the cinema, I answer the emails I've received during the day and enter a completely different writing and

communication device where “active, responsive comprehension” (to use Bakhtine’s words) that were neutralized by the television can now be exercised. I enter another public arena.

I go to the cinema, just in time for the last showing where once again I experience the “ordinary” suspension of the world. This time the suspension affects perception and its usual coordinates in space and time. My sensory-motor system is faulty since the images and movements no longer depend either on objects or on my brain, but are automatically produced by a machinic device. Cinematic editing upsets the connections between situations, images and movements by making me enter into other spatio-temporal blocks. In pre-signifying or symbolic semiologies, the substances and forms of expression exist in parallel and are not articulated in linear fashion as they are in language. In a film, there are different lines of expression: the sound line, the visual line, the line of light, of colour, etc. “The issue is not about a syntax or a key that would impose coherence on the relationship between these different lines.” (Guattari)

The political question that we need to ask in the face of the processes of subjection and enslavement outlined above is the following: how do we escape these relationships of domination and how do we develop practices of freedom and processes of individual and collective subjectivation using these same technologies?

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* Translator's note: phrase referring to interactive technologies that engage the mind.