Figures of the Subject in Times of Crisis*

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"Moi, quand quelque chose me dépasse, je ris seulement."

Douala resident, August 1993

The following remarks are about subjectivities of "the crisis" and their corollary, the crisis of the subject. The first term refers to the crisis as a constitutive site of particular forms of subjectivity. The second term invokes the crisis of the very act of signifying this moment. These two instances, constitution and signification, are decisive elements in the generalized production of violence in the world today. They are also instances of its specificity.

The moment being considered, then, is not without date, place, or name. In fact, the object of our commentary is a precise phenomenon: contemporaneousness. Its real time can only be called the "immediate present". And it is the spirit (*esprit*), visibility, and profanity of this immediate present that is at the heart of our inquiry. This "immediate time" and "present duration" are defined by the acute economic depression, the chain of upheavals and tribulations, instabilities, fluctuations and ruptures of all sorts (wars, genocide, large-scale movements of populations, sudden devaluations of currencies, natural catastrophes, brutal collapses of prices, breaches in provisioning, diverse forms of exaction, coercion, and constraint) that make up the fundamental experiences of African societies over the last several years.[1] The specific conjuncture referred to here, this age that merges with immediate time, this contemporaneousness, is what Africans and others have called "the crisis". That is to say, and this is what we hope to demonstrate: the entanglement of a plurality of real and not wholly distinct transformations; the combining and packaging of experiences lived by people at all levels of society; and the physical and mental violence that issues from the lack of coincidence between the everyday practice of life (facticity) and the corpus of significations or meanings (ideality) available to explain and interpret what happens, to act efficaciously and, in so doing, attempt to overcome the specter of nothingness (*le néant*: in the double sense of nothingness and meaningless).

This inquiry responds to several questions, some theoretical, others less so, but all concern the general *problématique* of the constitution of specific regimes of subjectivity in the context and as a result of the specific conjuncture described below. By regime of subjectivity, we mean: a shared ensemble of imaginary configurations of "everyday life"[2] imaginaries which have a material basis; and, systems of intelligibility to which people refer in order to construct a more or less clear idea of the causes of phenomena and their effects, to determine the domain of what is possible and feasible, as well as the logics of efficacious action. More generally, a regime of subjectivity is an ensemble of ways of living, representing, and experiencing contemporaneousness while, at the same time, inscribing this experience in the mentality, understanding, and language of a historical time.

According to this formulation, we are not interested primarily in the *problématiques* of resistance, emancipation, or autonomy.[3] We distance ourselves from these questions in order to better apprehend, in today's context, the series of operations in and through which people weave their existence in incoherence, uncertainty, instability, and discontinuity; then, in the experience of the reversal of the material conditions of their societies, they recapture the possibility for self-constitution, thus instituting other "worlds of truth". By setting our sights on the domains of the unforeseen and the unexpected, the productive moments during which the incomplete nature of things coincides with the

reversibility of that which has been acquired, and by attending to the stupor associated with terror, where individuals and societies are taken aback, defigured and without stable referents, we hope to apprehend an apparent paradox: in Africa today, becoming a "subject" involves a splitting of identities which fuels a certain pragmatics of subjection, both of which make up a simultaneous moment.

This approach, contrary to typical discourses on politics and the economy in Africa, does not reduce the crisis to an event whose meaning is exhausted once it has been analyzed and deciphered statistically, becoming then simply an object of proposed reform as in the framework of structural adjustment programs.[4] Against statistical representations, this is an attempt to treat the crisis as, above all, lived experience. Secondly, this suggests that it is in everyday life that the crisis as a limitless experience and a field of the dramatization of particular forms of subjectivity is authored, receives its translations, is institutionalized, loses its exceptional character, and in the end, as a "normal", ordinary and banal phenomenon, becomes an imperative to consciousness. Such "normalization", which is also the tautology involved in explaining the crisis by the crisis, results from a combination of repertoires. The very notion of the crisis widely serves as a structuring idiom. In this sense, it constitutes almost in-and-of-itself a singular mode of apprehending (and hence narrating, or living) immediate agonies. The crisis also operates as a figure of rationality and an existential device. In other words, by relegating the crisis to the realm of the inexplicable, people likewise simultaneously circumscribe a field of both constraints and possible, reasonable, and legitimate action. Through acting on the basis of these rationalities, in the midst of these entangled fields of action, they themselves end up participating in the very process of the production of the crisis: a self-referring chain.

Yet we do not wish to underestimate the weight of external factors and the role of global forces on the origins and course of what has been called the crisis. The nature of these constraints has largely been explored and documented, and their historical underpinnings brought to light,[5] even if their present mutations still essentially belie analysis.[6] The question for research is no longer simply measuring the impact of the crisis on society or measuring the disparities between prescribed reforms and their realization as in the case of classical analyses. Unlike readings of the crisis that are limited to socioeconomic indicators commonly used to describe, understand, and explain the current situation in Africa, the approach outlined here obliges the scholar to "return to the field"[7]. Return to the field does not signify, however, a mechanical turn to "local knowledge"; people themselves claim that they no longer understand what is happening to them, much less that they have mastered the ins-and-outs of the processes in which they are implicated. The problem is, indeed, that the determining forces of the societies we study are not located in the sites where inquiries founded on a static epistemology have until now sought to find them.[8] Thus, contrary to an approach based on linear perceptions of cause and effect, one must, in a self-reflective move, apprehend what the analyst defines in terms of the destructuring "effects" of the crisis as in fact *already there*, or in the process of being constituted in an uneven manner. Thus one approaches the crisis not as a system, but as a prosaic: the routinization of a *register of improvisations* lived as such by people and, in this sense, belonging at most to the domain of the obvious or self-evident, and at least to the banal or that which no longer evokes surprise.

This, then, is what we shall examine through examples taken, for the most part, from urban life in Cameroon. In the first part of this discussion, we will outline a geography of the crisis by detailing, from examples lived and known by a large number of people, the way in which the crisis is inscribed in the everyday urban landscape, in its material structures such as roads, residences, and office buildings, and in social interactions and relations of power, profit, and subsistence. This description serves two purposes. First, it gives a concrete indication of the living space of the subject, the forms of inscription of the crisis in public space, the body, and material life, in brief, its physicality.[9] It also serves as an introduction to the very field of representations of the time and imaginary of the crisis, paying

heed to its supposed abrupt and sudden character. In the remaining part of the text, we underscore the relationship that exists between these representations and the destabilization of certain referents. And since in the present context, this relationship also opens the way for a remarkable proliferation of criteria for judgment, we will examine how this proliferation affects logics of efficacious action and renders recourse to paradoxical logics more likely."[10] Finally, we shall indicate how all of this leads to a crisis of the subject — and thus of meaning — and produces conditions favorable to forms of violence that are specific to the present conjuncture.

The Crisis in Space and Matter

Of all African countries, Cameroon was considered and considered itself, until the mid-1980s, to be a land endowed with economic assets such as petroleum, lumber, cocoa, coffee, cotton. Its annual rates of growth were among the highest on the continent. The implementation of a series of five-year development plans led to numerous investments, expanded the mass of wealth, and accelerated the process of social stratification. A powerful urban middle class emerged. On the whole, however, this class depended on its incorporation in the state apparatus, and especially the army and civil service, for its reproduction. A private sector was developing and its dynamism varied according to regions and sectors of activity.[11] Furthermore, this relative prosperity had been made part and parcel of official and popular representations of national identity and Cameroonian singularity.

These representations were based on the idea that Cameroon was on a continuous and irreversible path of progress in a context in which the creation of wealth and material welfare seemed without limits. This context was translated for urban and rural families in concrete terms by the possibilities for investing in children's education, attaining health care, buying real estate or a car, building a house, or even engaging in entrepreneurial activities — in brief, of raising their standards of living[12] This ensemble of virtual and real possibilities included both that which had been acquired, insofar as this involved specific possessions, and that which was assured, to the extent that one imagined the present and the future, and thus elaborated ideas about society and community on the basis of these possibilities. Moreover, a tacit pact, guaranteed by the single party and founded on the principle of the reciprocal assimilation of elites into the centers of power, allowed for the unequal redistribution of material and symbolic rents between different social strata and regions. This in turn assured a certain legitimacy for the ruling regime.[13] And it is this entire material and symbolic architecture that has crumbled under the weight of the crisis.

Its most physical and visible mark, that which captures the eye and is instantaneously frozen as a vision, what one might call its iconicity, is the image of abandonment and general decomposition which contrasts so starkly with the picture of affluence and prosperity that prevailed only a few years ago. The apparently abrupt nature of this rupture is most obvious in Yaoundé, where, as Cameroon's capital, the markers of modernity are supposed to be exhibited. Since the colonial period, roads have been one of the city's most distinctive signs of modernity. Today, Yaoundé's roads are in near total disrepair and dilapidation. Central avenues are as bad as streets in peripheral neighborhoods. Many roads that were paved a few years ago are now paths of beaten earth. They are broken up by sections that juxtapose efforts at resurfacing with potholes, crevices, and ditches which can be as wide as the road itself. Most traffic circles are nothing more than a heap of old tires or empty, rusted barrels.

The traffic lights no longer function. Some are still intact, but no longer give off any luminous signal. Due to the absence of maintenance, vandalism, or, more often, car accidents, others have either been torn out of the ground, exposing their massive cement base, or dangerously lean over the ad hoc sidewalk or road. Although they are all still there, sometimes in the very spot where they were erected,

they are now masses of useless "traces", outliers of bygone days.

Such conditions incite a very particular economy of traffic circulation.[14] At first glance, its seems to lack rules or order. The chaos is undeniable even if it is sometimes misleading. In fact, drivers combine manners proper to the bush and those of the town, those of the military with the civil. These conditions produce deviations from recognized norms, such as the observance of specific rights of way, which of course, lead to accidents. The road is a disputed space, where private cars, taxis, public transportation, truck drivers, military jeeps, police cars, mopeds, bicycles, rickshaws, pedestrians, cattle, sheep, goats, and fowl intermingle and confront one another. Sudden stops and random parking, collisions that block traffic and cause congestion, the exchange of insults and physical abuse are par for the course. Furthermore, now that the automobile has entered the realm of increasingly rare objects, the figure of the pedestrian is again firmly rooted in the urban landscape. With every passing vehicle the partly beaten earth, partly paved roadway becomes a "whirlwind of red dust which suffocates the pedestrian and sticks to clothing, even becoming a sticky, thick muck with the least bit of intemperate if not infrequent rainfall"[15]. The absence of traffic lights and thus explicit rules of circulation combined with this teeming, swarming atmosphere render the road a particularly productive disciplinary device. Experience on and familiarity with the road gives rise to an array of dispositions and arts of negotiation that are constitutive of subjectivities of conflict.[16]

The other attribute and metaphor of progress and modernity was, until recently, the automobile itself. Today, the passenger is never sure about arriving at the desired destination. This is partly due to the innumerable breakdowns resulting from the vehicle's age and problems such as sagging shock absorbers, missing windshields and doors, car bodies riddled with holes, faulty soldering and makeshift repairs leading to defective articulations as well as dead starters which require a car to be pushed to get it going. Factors as prosaic as lack of servicing, the artisanal mounting of spare parts,[17] and impossibility (when one is without a salary) of paying for gas must also be taken into account. In fact, most cars run on the reserve tank. Parsimony constrains drivers to turn off the engine and coast down hills in order to save gas. The wreckage of automobiles, bus cemeteries, passengers who strain behind a wheezing car: all of this has been from day to day so etched onto the urban landscape that it no longer creates a spectacle. It ceases to surprise. And so the physicality of the crisis reduces people to a precarious condition that affects the very way in which they define themselves.

The automobile, however, continues to "be useful for something". It is still an object of appropriation as a sign, belonging to a logic that is partly inspired by class affiliations.[18] This is evident from the attraction to, and fascination with, the most luxurious and expensive models. But, at the same time, because it is most often broken down and immobilized, the car no longer participates with the same intensity in the logic of ostentation, at least for the middle class. Its presence can be more of a monument than anything else: a broken utensil; a vestige of a shattered career; a once prosperous commerce now bankrupt; and a social status from which one was seemingly ejected. At most, then, it has become a figurative object.

Like roads and cars, the crisis has reconfigured another sign of modernity and economic progress — electric lighting. There are very few neighborhoods where all houses, buildings, and streets have electricity. With dusk, the city, now dulled, spreads over its vast expanse of hills and valleys, gaping in places with black holes and shadows, brightened elsewhere with small concentrations of light, sometimes emanating from kerosene lamps. These pockets are magnets for various passersby who participate in the city's nocturnal life. On the edges of the ad hoc sidewalks, the commerce of the night proceeds. An entire urban food economy controlled by women selling foodstuffs like beans and fish provides subsistence to those on the margins and, increasingly, entire families struck by the irregularity of revenue and rarity of money. Public lighting and the lack of it also have other meanings.

Associated with violent scenarios, the lack of public lighting and entry into a state of darkness throw into question the specificity of Cameroonian national identity. The idea of its specificity rested in part upon the notion that violent scenarios belonged to countries like Rwanda, Somalia, Chad, Zaire, or Liberia, and that such situations were not reproducible in Cameroon. The failure of public lighting and the plunge into darkness are now perceived as intimating that such violent scenarios are now on the order of the possible (*de l'ordre du possible*).[19]

The signs of dilapidation are not only visible in places where people move about. The landscape of decay is everywhere, unfolding and arranging itself like a fold in a fabric on the edge of the world; in the midst of an almost surreal decor, transformations are enveloped in quasi-magical effects. The city is laced with a string of litter and refuse that is rarely collected.[20] Masses of rubbish have become the capital's landmarks, replacing street names and main crossroads. When they spill over in all directions and infest the atmosphere with their stench, the garbage is set on fire. Its smoke rises from entire parts of the city and can be seen from miles away. It is testimony to this work of Sisyphus; this devouring and omnivorous force cannot be ensnared and becomes practically autonomous. Vegetation overruns not only the capital city, but also most of the secondary towns, which were once prosperous due to their integration in economic and transportation circuits. The following passage describes one of these towns:

Today, what once was the river quay is now overrun with bushes of wild grass; the arrival of lumber by floating, a spectacle that always brought reveling schoolchildren, of which I was one, belongs to the past. A mysterious scourge chased away the white exploiters of the forest. The trading posts and general stores that swarmed with rustic and avid clients have disappeared, as have their light-skinned managers, always disdainful and never attentive. Mbalmayo is only a phantom of what it once was, a sort of dusty and flea-ridden Far West.[21]

The same is true for certain gigantic industrial projects dating from the era of abundance. This is notably the case for the Cellucam paper pulp factory at Edea, which is located in the very heart of the equatorial forest on a plateau overhanging the cutoff of the Sanaga River. The part of the forest granted to the company contained more than twenty-five species that are highly valued on the world market (*bubinga, doussié, sipo, sapelli, mahogany, iroko, and azobé*). Aside from the actual industrial infrastructure, the site includes a residential complex. The executive housing estate contains about fifty whitewashed villas surrounded by fir trees; the workers' housing development consists of about one hundred buildings. The encampment which was reserved for expatriate and bachelor workers who helped build the factory includes an impressive edifice over fifty meters tall. It towers majestically in the middle of a collection of other colossal constructions which covers over sixty hectares and is cordoned off by a practically insurmountable hedge.

Over this site, now engulfed by rampant grass, reigns the silence of a cemetery. It looks like a ghost town, completely deserted by its inhabitants. Luxurious vegetation has invaded up to the asphalt paths that once gave the encampment the look of a modern city. The buildings, with their dilapidated walls and rusted antitheft window coverings, have lost their fixtures and, for the most part, their electricity meters as well. All metal apparatus is heavily damaged; immense machines are now jammed and inoperable. The most gripping image of this "cannibalism" and spectacular destruction of wealth is the factory's parking lot. David Nouwou describes the debacle:

Imagine several hundred rotted vehicles (trucks, buses, personal cars, lumber haulers, tractors of all kinds) barely visible, buried in a tawny vegetation that has established its right to the city. When walking amongst them, one discovers that the vehicles were geometrically arranged, certainly being in perfect condition at the time. Today they are 100 percent deteriorated. Only the bodies upheld by

the wheel rims attest to the car models. They say there are hundreds of vehicles thus abandoned in the different zones of the forest where companies operated; scores of others having been sold off or stolen.[22]

And the stock of over a thousand blocks of wood stored by the company before its closure was devoured, over a one-month period, by a gigantic brush fire, thus transforming the area into an immense Gehenna.

This state of decay and destitution can also be gleaned from the numerous construction sites that have been abandoned long before completion of their projects. The phenomenon is so extensive and so significant that it is worth introducing a few distinctions. First, some of these are public construction sites that were initiated by the government. These mostly include administrative office buildings; their construction began when the state had more or less stable sources of revenue. Today these work sites, which are in the city center, look as though the construction workers left one day for lunch and never returned. Tools are strewn about, often fixed in positions as if they were still in use.

Other buildings seem, from the outside, like modern skyscrapers. When night falls they are even lit up. Sometimes a security service prevents thieves from making off with the precious objects found within. However, these buildings are not at all operational. This is the case, for instance, with the edifice located on the Boulevard John Paul II, which was to be the headquarters of the Cameroonian Development Bank. Its cost was estimated at 5 billion francs CFA (or US$20 million).[23] In 1991, while this luxury building was being raised, the bank was dissolved by presidential decree. The bank had financed nonprofitable projects and various dignitaries of the regime had large outstanding credits with the bank.

Other similar buildings thrust massive cement columns into the sky. Ironwork, doors, shards of broken windows, even shredded curtains clutter these buildings, the rest of their contents such as doors, tiles, locks, sanitary material having been pillaged, sometimes right in front of passersby and public authorities. Some of these places, now used as squats, have been transformed into hideouts for all sorts of marginalized people. The Interministerial Building at the Central Post Office crossroads is one example. Work on this building was interrupted in the middle of the 1980s, even though it was nearly finished. Its cost was estimated at more than 20 billion francs CFA (US$80 million). It was being Figures of the Subject in Times of Crisis financed with public funds and the work executed by a group of French and Cameroonian companies. Today, small-scale informal trade flourishes in front of this twenty-story uncompleted architectural undertaking. Countless street vendors have colonized this space and sell pedestrians an array of merchandise, from shoes, radios, cassettes, books, and diverse documents, pharmaceutical products, and beauty aids to trinkets and cheap kitsch. And besides serving as a refuge for marginals, the interior of the building is now a public urinal and depository for excrement.[24]

And, still under the rubric of official buildings, there are the homes and palaces of disinherited notables and historical figures of Cameroonian society. A particularly prominent example is the old presidential palace on the slopes of Mont Febe. The palace had been built by Ahmadou Ahidjo, who was head of state from 1958 to 1982 and died in exile in 1989 after having been condemned to death and then pardoned by the successor that he himself had selected.

Abandoned work sites include not only factories, offices, and residences but also places of worship. Two examples are the Catholic cathedral of Mvolye and the mosque at Tsinga. The cathedral seems hardly begun; its collection of icons, pillars, and columns might almost have been excavated from a Greco-Roman archaeological site. The mosque, which seems hardly finished, features a decapitated

minaret. Both administrative and religious buildings, with their massive amounts of cement buried in the ground or rising into the sky, attest not only to a form of architecture entirely dedicated to the grandiloquence and baroque majesty adored by postcolonial power in Cameroon, but also to its corollary, an extravagant and unproductive economy of public and private expenditure. Central to this unproductive economy was a system of public contracting (*marché public*).

According to its generally accepted definition, a *marché public* is open to public bidding. It issues from a contract concluded between a public or private entity and a public establishment or collectivity, or even a parastatal body. By contract, the former makes a commitment to the latter to realize, either for their benefit or under their surveillance, work defined by a common accord, or to furnish goods and services. In principle, and at the level of regulation, an offer to tender was an obligatory procedure for all Cameroonian public contracts with costs exceeding 50 million francs CFA (US$200,000). For lesser amounts, a letter from the minister or head of the establishment sufficed, at least until recently. The open call to tender generally involved a public call for competitive bidding unless it was addressed to a limited number of candidates chosen for apparent economic or technical reasons. In this case, it was termed "limited" or "restrained".

A central structure, the Direction Générale des Grands Travaux du Cameroun (DGTC), was charged with initiating invitations to tender on behalf of the administration and local collectivities, as well as public and parapublic firms. It was also responsible for consultative advice as to the ranking of the submitting parties during the period of examination. This was done upon completion of the work of a technical subcommission, composed of representatives of the DGTC and those of the ministry or other entity involved. This subcommission established a first ranking on the basis of ostensibly technical criteria. The portfolios were then submitted to the National Commission of Markets for scrutiny before passing for signature to the representative of the presidency. After this procedure for making a public contract was concluded, the DGTC was responsible for monitoring the project, providing technical assistance, and signing accounts and bills presented by the firm for reimbursement.

This bureaucratic framework for negotiating and monitoring contracts gave rise to an entire social commerce with forms of political exchange and modes of appropriating public goods that were widely known. The architectural text of unfinished edifices stands as a reminder of this political subtext. This commerce and these forms of exchange involved a diverse set of Cameroonian and foreign actors which includes businessmen, high-ranking officials, firms, French negotiators, and brokers. Together, and often in competition and conflict, they plotted a structure of interests and set in motion a regime of ownership and modalities for the realization of private revenues. The specificity of this regime was that it relied neither on imposing obligatory labor on subjects, nor on directly using the labor force itself. This mesh of predatory interests, brokers, and local agents rendered the state less a public good than a social relation of domination founded essentially on coercive exchange, plunder, and consumption. In other words, this manner of appropriating wealth created its social meaning through the very act of destroying and dissipating wealth.

This system allowed public contracts to be concluded with firms which had not presented any submission. Other contracts were offered without a call to tender; that is, without a call to competition and hence in violation of regulatory statutes which defined them as restrictive, and prescribed that their signing be authorized by the president of the Republic. Over-invoicing was also a common practice. This was the case for overhead and assignment costs, especially when they involved expenses accruing to so-called expatriate personnel.[25] To these practices must be added those involving large expenditures for standing fleets of cars with the Land Cruiser, Renault 19, Peugeot 405 and 605 as the preferred models. In short, this was the nature of an array of officially acknowledged practices that were not, however, sanctioned and which were ultimately directed at circumventing regulation.

In many ministries, one tactic involved the fragmentation of all contracts worth over 50 million francs (US$20,000) into packages with costs below this mark, thus bringing them under the jurisdiction of the letter of order. Other methods of circumventing regulation were invented under the guise of "privatization". Fictitious firms and warehouses were created to recycle gains and avoid customs. Resulting income and properties were converted into a certain number of ornamental and prestige goods and objects. These goods could be displayed. They were circulated on the market of symbols and used by those in power to dumbfound, stupefy, and politically subjugate their dependents, or simply to mark the glamour of their social position, especially via ceremonies and other forms of grandiose expenditure.[26]

To be sure, according to economic calculations of loss and profit, this capacity for waste and the spectacular destruction of wealth is, as Bataille would have it, of a purely excremental order.[27] However, the experience examined here also indicates that such an interpretation is in some ways insufficient. In fact, the very meaning of loss must be elucidated if one is to respond to the question posed at the beginning of this discussion. And, as we have seen, the loss in question implies enormous material and physical investments. Likewise, an important part of the life of private and public institutions, as well as the various networks that gravitate around them, are organized according to these very acts of dissipation. Furthermore, the country's integration in the world economy is based on these logics, which combine consumption and national debt. That this immense work of material, physical, and symbolic investment leads to the depository for excrement described above undoubtedly confirms some of &taffies intuitions. And yet another aspect of this situation is that, through this evaporation of wealth, people also construct relations of cause and effect, thus circumscribing fields of possible action and elaborating forms of behavior that accentuate the crisis.[28]

Public expenditures can also be interpreted as one of the registers of sovereignty. It provides the sites where the state endeavors to combine the monstrative exercise of physical violence and arbitrary symbolic acts. In this way, expenditure is part of an omnivorous political configuration, where public and private forces mingle; where spoils, salaries, exactions, fees, and monopolies are inseparable; and where the state apparatus and framework for extraction are one and the same. Hence, during the "forced recovery" (*recouvrement forcé*) or collection of taxes (automobile stickers, small merchant licenses, the headtax) the police, militia, and army set up barriers all along the national roads, through cities and villages, giving Cameroon the air of a country at war.[29] All these forces are charged with "closing establishments and firms, impounding vehicles and locking up thousands of young, unemployed youth who are incapable of attending to their basic needs let alone paying their taxes"[30].

Finally, the crisis seems to have seized people in the very interiors of their homes, becoming a part of their domesticity. Between 1984 and 1988, Cameroon witnessed a boom in the building industry. The years of relative affluence (1979-86) following the injection of a portion of oil revenues into the economy led to a frenzy in construction that was not limited to the state. And even though the conditions for accessing credit remained prohibitive, numerous executives, managers, and officials who once rented their houses decided to privilege investment in property. At the same time, large-scale urban renewal was initiated. This run on property was still underway when the crisis hit; and the crisis abruptly ended it. Every neighborhood in the city is now studded with half-built villas and abandoned houses, sometimes with belongings and furniture left inside or overrun with undergrowth that the rainy season sends to vertiginous heights. Families living in semi-constructed houses and villas have become so commonplace that one is regularly ushered into homes with, "Welcome to our construction site!" or "Excuse us, we live in a construction site." Obsolete and rundown furnishings and appliances have become a constitutive feature of home decor; often a telephone sits mutely on a pedestal, with service terminated due to unpaid bills.[31]

The sudden nature of this intrusion is well illustrated by popular expressions: "The crisis fell on our heads" (*La crise est tombé sur nos têtes*) and "I've got the crisis" (*J'ai la crise*).[32] This experience, which is at once intimate and dramatic, gives rise to narratives that no longer locate the crisis in an evolutionary history; that is to say, in a causal description of an event that develops over a relatively long period of time. The experience and the imaginary of time that results are of a condensed, compressed, and abrupt nature. Because of this contraction, the transformations taking place are not necessarily correlated to precise factors and historical referents, even if one is aware that these elements do in fact exist. For lack of these referents, the crisis is exiled to the domain of the inexplicable.

Explanation by the Inexplicable

When one asks people to explain the events described above, and to render "intelligible" the lived experiences these situations incite, people generally respond that they no longer understand what is happening. However, it would be wrong to regard this answer as a simple claim to ignorance. To the extent that this statement tends to become, for those involved, an answer which is valid in-and-of-itself and is hence legitimate, it deserves further consideration. On the one hand, it is important to retrace the path that leads to such a response (how does one arrive there?). On the other hand, if people "understand" their lived experiences as incomprehensible, what forms of (in)action does such an intelligibility or even such a mental disposition lead to? And to what extent can one say, at the same time, that this complex of dispositions and conduct itself contributes to the very aggravation of the crisis?

Without responding directly to these questions, insight can be gained by recalling the historical context and intellectual moment from which they arise. The historical context is that of a society knocked about and mistreated by a succession of instabilities, shortages, constraints, and blockages. Some of these phenomena are of external origin, others are from within, but all bring about several types of incoherence. As noted above, these discontinuities and contradictions (*incohésions*) are becoming more and more systematic, to the point where one can no longer locate what results from mere chance, or accident, and what results from the "normal" state of affairs. The examples outlined above also demonstrate that the conditions of the very material reproduction of society are being intensely modified. This movement appears to be taking place in a manner that is so unexpected and sudden, at least in people's consciousness, that it induces "surprise", "perplexity", and even a sort of "stupor". Because it is lived as an abrupt experience, this bundle of events incites recourse to other categories of reference, other systems of causality, or, in brief, other regimes of intelligibility. On the other hand, Cameroonian society's long-standing capacity to "imagine" itself in a certain manner — to mentally author and, from this, institute itself[33] — has been contradicted and seems now thrown into question. As indicated above, at the time when annual growth rates were on the order of six to seven percent, Cameroonians perceived themselves as a part of a rich nation, with infinite possibilities before them. This was, to be sure, part of a deliberate effort to imagine a national identity founded on economic attributes. Today's bankruptcy places this mode of imagining the nation in check, leaving in its wake certain forms of nostalgia. One is incessantly reminded: "Only a few years ago, things were not as they are now."[34] This attests to a sense of loss both in the material sense of waste and dilapidation as well as in the sense of existential deprivation and disorientation.

Indeed, from within this dislocation Cameroonians attempt to articulate new forms of rationality based on emergent understandings of efficacious action which often issue from ambiguous and contradictory situations. For example, consumers of electricity provided by the national company, sometimes with the complicity of the company's own agents, have their meters jammed so that they can consume as much electricity as desired for free. The same practice applies to water consumption.

The rationing of water and the segmentation of its sale have also become widespread: the consumer of water, no longer able to pay for the service, is obliged to buy it from itinerant vendors or from private parties who subcontract it out. Furthermore, agents of the urban transport company have established parallel services for the sale of tickets. Similarly train passengers, instead of buying tickets at the normal price, "make arrangements" (*s'arrangent*) with conductors at much lower prices. In a like manner, during roadblock inspections, a common occurrence, police and militiamen pocket the fines for citations and "warnings".

Fraudulent identity cards; fake policemen dressed in official uniform; army troops complicit with gangs of thieves and bandits; forged enrollment for exams; illegal withdrawal of money orders; fake banknotes; the circulation and sale of falsified school reports, medical certificates, and damaged commodities: all of this is not only an expression of frenetic trafficking and "arranging". It is also a manifestation of the fact that, here, things no longer exist without their parallel. Every law enacted is submerged by an ensemble of techniques of avoidance, circumvention, and envelopment which, in the end, neutralize and invert the legislation.[35] There is hardly a reality here without its double. Hence acting efficaciously requires that one carefully cultivate an extraordinary capacity to be simultaneously inside and outside, for and against, and to constantly introduce changes in the reading and usage of things, playing, in this way, with the structures and apparatuses, capturing them where possible and eluding them where necessary, and in any event, amputating them and almost always emptying them of their formal and designated functions so one can better restore them with those that correspond best to desired goals and expected gains.

Without denying the scattered and inchoate character of most of these acts, their ultimately unsystematic, chaotic, and inconclusive nature, it should be noted that they are repeated with such regularity at all levels of society that they are well known to almost everyone. They are widespread and are, in this sense, no longer simply isolated incidents or simple tinkerings with the system in order to survive.[36] Instead, they have become "ways of doing" which belong to the register of new forms of public knowledge: the constitution of a prosaic that is not specifically African, but is rather particular to all times of crisis in a general sense. Certainly, for now, the legitimation of such practices is an object of dispute. They are vehemently condemned by the public authorities (without leading to effective sanctions) as well as by the general public, even while they themselves continue to resort to such practices.

To a large extent, it is the daily negotiation with the absurd in order to subsist and survive that induces people to say they "no longer understand". The paradoxical situations in which they find themselves are thus qualified as "incredible", "unimaginable", and even "insane"[37]. The density of the constraints that grip everyday life is no doubt such that one is never sure to get by, as the following narrative of a train ride demonstrates:

> *"It was the station at Belabo. We wanted two seats on the night train to Ngaoundere. The station teemed with people. Some were standing, others lay on the ground or sat on the edge of the rails, sometimes in the shadows. Itinerant vendors, legal and clandestine transporters, an entire mass of people came and went in indolence and numbness, punctuated by abrupt waves. A long line of travelers waited wearily; their wait would last an eternity. Finally, at 11 p.m., the ticket window opened. Yet the line remained as immobile as before; while purchasers advanced, other voyagers tacked on to the end so that the length of the line seemed always the same. The sale of a ticket took about fifteen minutes, including the identification of destination, the choice of seating, the unraveling of the tickets, unfurling of bank notes and coins, the search for change, calculating the difference, the manual inscription of the price and other information, and the inevitable rubber stamp officializing the document. From entry into the line to arrival at the ticket window,*

we spent over an hour. Upon leaving the window, it was evident that the train's estimated arrival time had long passed.

Hoping to have a minimum of comfort but not wanting to pay the price of a berth, we had twice requested access to the first class wagon. And the cashier twice responded favorably. We consequently paid the required fee. The train arrived at about 1:40 in the morning. We immediately sought out the first-class car. It was nowhere. The second-class car and bunk car were all that were to be found. The train had hardly come to a halt when the crowd, once nonchalant and dozing, suddenly arose. Unleashed, the mass took the second-class car literally by assault. People pushed, swore, hurled abuses, and tossed bags, packages, children, and animals through doorways and windows, in a tumultuous confusion.

We located the conductor and, with all required deference, noted that the agent of the rail company had sold us tickets for services that were nowhere to be found. We thus had no seats for a night voyage of over 400 kilometers. A first-class wagon for night trains? No such thing existed, he informed us, adding that we could have access to the berth for a sum. We could have discussed it all night, but the fact was that the agent had consciously sold us fake tickets for services that did not exist. We traveled standing up, caught between voyagers who, overcome with fatigue, were strewn along the aisles, knocking the knees of those who constantly flowed from one end of the car to the other, in a quest for what, we never knew."[38]

In this specific instance, a formalized agreement such as paying a precise sum for a precise service on the basis of information given by the railway employee resulted in a loss of money and frustration. But this is not because formal rules and conventional procedures are not publicized or not respected. One can very well respect them. Yet this in no way automatically implies that the prescribed results will be attained. To the contrary, those who scrupulously follow the rules sometimes find themselves in a snarl, facing figures of the real that have little correspondence to what is publicly alleged or prescribed at the point of departure. Whether this involves a bureaucratic or a purely private transaction, every step must be negotiated. Thus when people refer to "insanity", they are not referring to a state which defects from reason, but rather to the unbearable discrepancy that exists between publicly announced reality and that other constantly changing, unstable and uncertain, quasi-elliptic realm that is consistently pursued and always dissipates, often emerging only after a long and exhausting bargain. It follows that "the real" of the crisis is "ephemeral" since it is marked by and punctuated with false starts, hyperbolic and highly eccentric rules, all of which require not only a particular theory of uncertainty, but also of causality and error. Every step or effort made to follow the written rule is susceptible to lead not to the targeted goal, but to a situation of apparent contradiction and closure from which it is difficult to exit either by invoking the very same rules and authorities responsible for applying them, or by reclaiming theoretical rights supposed to protect those who respect official law.

Furthermore, even where contracts and engagements are made, they are almost never definitive; they are always liable to renegotiation. Thus every contract or negotiation constitutes in itself a vast field of ambiguity which, as such, leaves enormous potential for dispute, argument, and discord. This profoundly provisional and revisable character of things is at the origin of the proliferation of criteria for efficacious action. The ensuing conduct ranges from pure and simple infractions to violations, evasion, avoidance, deviation, figuration, use of circumlocutions, improvisation, tossing the dice, and turning things inside out. Sometimes one-and-the-same operation requires several levels and forms of negotiation with several kinds of authority. This is, in part, due to the absence of institutional and material infrastructure: the telephone is not working; the electricity is temporarily cut; the attendant

is out or absent; money or a letter has not arrived; the schedule has changed or is broken; the chain of command is defective; the person responsible did not complete the required task; another document or official stamp is necessary.

Such conditions also relate to the extraordinary fragmentation and redundance of administrative services: for a single service, A can only give you certain information; B can only give you the application; C can give you advice about general formalities. D can sell you the stamp, but his services are located elsewhere and you must go in person. Only E can verify that the application has been properly filled out before transmitting it to F, who types it and sends it to G, who submits it to H, who is the supervisor. H then authorizes G to apply the rubber stamp. After the document is stamped, it is brought back to the supervisor, H, for signature. One must then return, often several times, before recovering it. Or, when it is not necessary to "come back tomorrow", one must stay and wait — "it's not ready yet".

These examples clearly demonstrate that extreme bureaucratization and specialization (Weber) do not necessarily lead to increased productivity.[39] With respect to the context being considered here, this gives rise to a particular mode of managing "public goods", where users substitute themselves for agents who undertake tasks and services usually rendered by public power. When trying to obtain an official document in a police station or ministry, one must purchase the application, furnish paper and writing utensils, find stamps, photocopy documents, and gather exact change before presenting oneself to the cashier. The same process also applies to other public institutions. In hospitals, it is not unusual that,to "be served", the patient must obtain cotton and alcohol, furnish implements for surgery, and pay — beyond salaries — the doctors and nurses. And schoolchildren must often bring chalk, tables, and chairs to class; their parents also contribute in cash or kind to the salary of the teacher. This is what we have labeled "do-it-yourself bureaucracy". However, what we wish to underscore is not the extraordinary, but the routine. In constructing the frameworks of everyday life, these now common practices destabilize the referents once considered intrinsic to the constitution of order and hierarchy. One of the consequences of this is the corrosion of long-standing conceptions of causality and responsibility, or the dissolution of authority itself.

The Crisis of the Subject and Historical Violence

The dissolution of authority and the unhinging of its associated hierarchy and order first take the form of a dispersal of the attributes of public power. This, however, does not mean that there are no longer mechanisms and agents of power. Soldiers, policemen, and militia continue to lead the "fiscal war", for example, they survey documents, extort goods, and confiscate commodities. But this kind of violence does not necessarily imply an opposition between a dissipating form of authority and an emergent one. As the following example shows, this is not the case since it proceeds from the monopolization and reinterpretation of roles in directions that were, in the past, either unthinkable, reprehensible, and reprimanded, or impracticable:

> *"After the inspection of documents, the police officer asks the taxi driver to put his foot on the brakes. If the brake lights fail, the poor driver falls through the trap. If not, the inspection continues. Everything is subject to it: tires, brakes, shock absorbers, headlights, blinkers, bumpers. Tired of insisting, the cops have recourse to their last card, the missing fire extinguisher and first-aid kit, before asking all of the passengers for their papers. The second device is simply to waste time. The policeman stops a taxi, asks for ‚the documents', and moves away from the vehicle. He talks with his colleagues without even deigning to glance at the papers. Hurried and tired of waiting, the passengers get out of the taxi one by one and hitch rides with other cars. ... As soon as the taxi*

driver gives ‚500', the policeman returns his documents and the pigeon is free to fly away and be plucked elsewhere."[40]

The decline of public authority and its defection from responsibility has led to a situation of confusion and chaos which people impute not only to the crisis, but also to "democracy": "Now everyone does what they please." Such is the case when one considers the state of the garbage in Yaoundé. Common responses to the problem are: "It's uncontrollable", "it's ungovernable", "we don't know whom to address", "we no longer know who is responsible for what", "we don't know what to do any longer", "it's beyond us". Generally speaking, the expression "we no longer know what to do" implies that one has tried in vain to transform existing conditions to the point where the capacity to produce concrete effects has been exhausted. "We no longer know whom to address" implies that one can no longer identify pertinent authorities or, in any case, be heard by them. This also indicates that some sites of power now escape all control; that is, they are now endowed with immunities.

Such conditions structure forms of violence in daily transactions and relationships which include the transgression and forced alienation of rights, as well as purely physical abuse. Practices that are perhaps most likely to entail violent confiscation of goods and property are those involving the systematic sale of public services. Here, for example, is a description of an everyday scenario:

"In certain magistrates' courts, retrieval of official documents, such as form number 3 the criminal record, requires one to respond to superfluous for stamps [which one] applied, will be immediately recuperated and resold b administrators. [Among othe requests, there are] so-called research expenses. Their costs mltiply with the number of copies, requested by the user. And this, without counting he eventual inflitation of the final bill, is much influenced by the apearance of the client. Attemps at fraud are now assured at all levels. ... At the treasuries, the little swindlers continue to systematically apply a ‚comission' of 5 to 25 percent on bills and salaries to be paid. Furthermore, it is difficult to mobilize the police for a problem under their jurisdiciton if one has not ‚greased his palm'. In all sectors of public service, there is always slighty illegal way to ‚get by'. Fewer and fewer bosses who have not maintained their small network of ‚fakes' have conserved their aura. ... Women try to sell their colleagues as many tidbits and trinkets as possible in order to make ends meet."[41]

In order to apprehend these developments in a manner which demonstrates clearly how they are implicated in the general enactment of power, and moreover, in the structuration of violence — thus contributing to the latter's specific content — analyses proceeding from normative concepts such as corruption are to be avoided. Indeed, state services and functions which are thus sold are, above all, a series of formalities. The user is constrained to carry out or fulfill these formalities each time he or she must retrieve a salary, pass an official examination, go before the courts, obtain a visa, or renew a license. In perfect colonial tradition, the maximal content of the formality is the signature, itself authenticated by the rubber stamp.[42] And here public power surely has the monopoly, at least in principle. In a sense, the formalities — the signature being the one that perhaps most efficiently reduces power to the sign — are what users must buy at public prices applicable to all. The purchase allows users access to formal "rights" or, even better, to "authorizations" corresponding to domains covered by the object bought.

For now, we will simply consider that which is exercised at the precise moment when agents of so-called public service sell formalities to users on behalf of the state. In this instance, various phenomena are brought together, each contributing to the specific character of the exercise of violence in a time of crisis. First, there is the generalization of favors and privileges: one wants access to officially prescribed rights and authorizations, but by circumventing required formalities. This can be accom-

plished in many ways. Private arrangements can be made with the agent responsible for the public service. Or, in a context where agents of public power are paid episodically and public power itself no longer disposes of the necessary infrastructure to exercise its command, the user is often forced to purchase the materials necessary for the functioning of an official institution. Thus, in a private capacity, one directly assures the financing of a public service. Also, in buying the formality, one directly compensates the public servant who is supposedly remunerated by the state. Otherwise, one pays stamp and other formal taxes, and sometimes even assumes the very task of the bureaucrat. What we termed *do-it-yourself bureaucracy* is a site where, on the one hand, functions devolved to public power are exercised by private users (a formal substitution) in an official capacity; and, on the other hand, the user is *de facto* no longer served, but pays to "self-serve". The formalities that are at the origin of these transactions continue, however, to be the property, so to speak, of public power and are not, strictly speaking, the object of an individual appropriation or a definitive alienation. What is important for our argument is that, at the heart of such a structure of action, the existence of these formalities is neither disputed nor does it determine the nature of day-to-day violence in the public sphere. Governing the specific content of the violence of the crisis is the interpretation of formalities and the determination of where and when they must be fulfilled, for example, what papers one must have when one drives a car. This interpretation is sufficiently underdetermined so that substantial margins are open for the intensification of impositions or levies, as well as their generalization. The violence of the crisis emerges as much from the dissolution and dispersion of authority as from the possibilities that follow from conducting arrangements from within official sites themselves.

But this excess, this proliferation of legitimate interpretations and the attendant violence itself rests on specific material conditions and a singular political economy. To be sure, in the public mind, the state is no one's property, not even the autocrat's. It is an anonymous and vacant domain. By the discretionary path of "nomination" and "the decree" the autocrat can nonetheless cede a portion of this anonymous domain to obliged subjects. Nomination to a position of responsibility or command, that is, control of a part of the apparatus of authorizations and formalities, is lived as an allocation in kind from which one can, by being astute, organize levies and parallel fiscal mechanisms. The present circumstances, where the autocrat endowed with the power of nomination finds himself no longer able to settle accounts, are favorable for the emergence of a particular type of domination that might be described as "discharge" (*décharge*). Through discharge, operations once solely executed by the state are allotted to henchmen who generalize, in this manner, the extortion of dues and fees. Here, extortion seems to be a substitute for forced labor. It is based on the idea of the enactment of fiscal relationships in kind. But discharge in no way implies the permanent appropriation of state property, anonymous as it is. At most, this only involves a concession; at best, a benefaction. It does not, however, guarantee immunity to whomever profits in a precarious or provisional manner. These practices should then be interpreted more in terms of dispensation than privatization.[43]

But one of the most flagrant signs of the decline of public power is what surely appears to be "the end of the salary" and its substitution by occasional payments, the amounts of which are steadily declining. This state of affairs, never before known in the history of the country, extends beyond agents of public service. It includes the entire salaried population and is linked to the problems of disaccumulation and illiquidity that now sap the country. The shortage of money affects the urban centers as well as the rural areas, the latter having lived to the monetary rhythms of the specific seasonal cycles of cocoa, coffee, cotton. In order to discern the magnitude of the dislocations that followed and the ways in which they have structured the subjectivities of the crisis, two points must be made. The first is that a major part of Cameroonian economic and political life was, until recently, organized around the "end of the month". The regularity of salary payments allowed for the regulation not only of the lives of those who earned them, but also those who depended on them for their survival, according to the principles of redistribution, allocations, transfers, and reciprocity studied by Francois-Regis Ma-

hieu in the case of the Ivory Coast.[44] The cycle of debts, contracts, and obligations was stimulated in this way, as was most formal and informal economic activity.

At the present time, the decrease in salary levels and irregularity of payments have introduced ruptures and discontinuities in these cycles, obliging people to negotiate forms of uncertainty and instability unknown heretofore. One of these is the date of salary payments. A large part of social life, particularly in cities, has been reorganized around this now unpredictable moment. Many live on the lookout, plunged in anxious, open-ended anticipation. They look for signs: a mob in front of the Treasury building or the bank, rumors and news of dates. People insist that they can no longer plan their lives or even make commitments. And this concerns events and phenomena as ordinary and vital as children starting the new school year, all sorts of ceremonies, health prevention and care, and even death and burial. All contracts become, of course, a risk. New forms of migration have appeared: every month, numerous government employees head for the capital from distant provinces in search of their salaries. From time to time soldiers and policemen, and even regular citizens, sequester bank managers and treasurers, retaining them as hostages, demanding to be paid on the spot. Because salaries allowed people to procure the necessities and even conveniences of life and assured subsistence for recipients and their dependents, allowing them to clothe and house themselves, and to prevent illness and hunger, this interruption leaves them exposed to the pressures of need and to the specific form of violence which is constituted by shortages and scarcity.

Because of the contradictory nature of subject positions and conduct (being inside and outside, for and against) described above, the response to this situation has not been uniform. Organized and silent protest alternates with accommodation and acceptance of a *fait accompli*. To understand the violence inherent in this atonic situation, it is important to remember that, in postcolonial Cameroon, besides being one of the privileged sites for the structuration of inequality and social stratification (because all remunerations are not equal), the relationship between salary, work, and wealth has led to a more or less legitimate form of domination, a particular form of civility that itself merits discussion.

For the general public, the equivalence between wealth and work understood as "toil and time, the working-day that at once patterns and uses up man's life"[45], was unclear since, for Cameroonians, it was obvious that people could become rich without submitting to fatigue and hunger, and without being exposed to death. Thus, bureaucratic "work" was neither perceived nor lived as a specifically or necessarily productive activity. It was therefore not conceptualized as a commodity or ware that one sold to the state, which purchased it for the price of a salary. Consequently, the quantity and value of work as such was not what was remunerated by these payments.

In the pre-crisis system, the salary was, like public expenditures examined above, a positivity not reducible to remuneration for productivity or the formation of wealth. It was a resource of the state insofar as it served to purchase obedience and to settle the population in disciplinary mechanisms. The salary, then, legitimated subjection by establishing a particular type of civility: authoritarian civility.[46] In this sense, it constituted a purely ascriptive and juridical allocation, as well as an indispensable cog in the dynamics of the relationship between state and society, and the constitution of a particular type of citizenship. This type of citizenship was not, above all, founded on the principle of political equality and representations thereof. It was based on "claims" (the salary being the most significant) from which the state created social debts. The construction of the political relationship was thus enacted in redistribution and not on the basis of representations of equivalence between human beings endowed with their own natural and civil rights, and thus able to have an effect on political decisions. By transforming the salary into a claim and a formality, the state granted subsistence to its subjects. But these means did not sanction a conversion of energy into wealth; they resulted in a

specific figure of obedience and domination. This is, moreover, why, in public discourse, these claims are sometimes represented as favors or, at least, privileges.[47]

This is perhaps why the "end of the salary", and its replacement with occasional payments, has not provoked the kind of outright, contentious mobilization one might expect. Civil workers continue to go to their offices even though they are not paid. Certainly, their reasons for doing so are complex. Many still hope that their salaries will arrive, betting that they are simply "late". Fear of losing the little that one has is, no doubt, a persuasive factor, since large-scale layoffs have taken place and continue to be announced. From a strictly sociological point of view, it is important to note that the workplace is also a social site, not unlike a cafe or salon. One goes there to make phone calls, visit people, sell things, converse. It is also a place for *rendezvous*. It marks off, in this sense, the frontier between "life inside", with its familial pressures, and "life outside".

What has developed is a form of protest by inertia. Few people come to their offices on time. Many are almost never there, preoccupied with the salary-chase or out "getting by" to make up for what is lacking at the end of the month. The disorganization of schedules is such that being present at work does not necessarily mean that one actually works nor that one is actually there.[48] Here, the absence of a violent popular reaction relates to two factors. For one, there is a profound memory of fear and real trauma associated with the defeat of historical movements of insubordination.[49] Also, after the failure of the civil disobedience movements of 1992 (Operation Villes Mortes), all protest is now thought to be inefficacious. In this context but on another level, the idea of inefficaciousness results from a certain conceptualization of relations of cause and effect which is connected to the experience of dissipation and loss discussed above.

It is important to underscore that irregular payment of salaries is not the only visible dimension of this violence. The other aspect, which affects innumerable high school, university, and technical graduates, is the large-scale lay-offs implemented in response to conditions set by international financial institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. This phenomenon is so massive that it has provoked an immense sense of anguish among an entire generation of young, educated persons. Those who still have a job live under the permanent threat of losing it. In response, a vast array of forms of protection have emerged, drawing from popular modes of Christianity and Islam—exorcism, purification and annointing, having offices blessed, wearing sacred objects and medications — as well as from the autochthonous world of the night and the invisible (*monde de la nuit et vie de l'invisible*).[50] This atmosphere of insecurity and tension is not limited to public places; the rise in domestic conflict, the rapidity with which people resort to anger, verbal abuse, and physical violence are evident in intimate and daily interactions. And this is aggravated by new forms of urban violence, inspired either by the quest for subsistence or attempts to eradicate the very sources of perceived danger. Such violence includes the lynching of thieves and presumed bandits by the citizenry, the repression of protesters and murder of taxi drivers by the police, armed attacks, and highway robbery.[51] In sum, a situation marked by extraordinary tension and nervousness (*nervosité*) prevails: the proliferation of all kinds of rumors; the escalation of credulity; the unleashing of an imaginary of marvel (*le merveilleux*) and evil (*malheur*), bad luck and pain. This deployment of violence has plunged a large part of the population into a prolonged state of anxiety and perplexity.

All of this, however, goes hand-in-hand with an extraordinary capacity to turn violence, the absurd, and even terror itself into a source of derision.[52] In the context described above, laughter is inseparable from the fear inspired by the immediate present, populated, as we have shown, by "evil spirits", that is, those things which are out of control, such as automobile circulation, garbage, brush-wood, construction sites, authorities, and people on the margins. The proliferation of criteria for judgment induces a state of uncertainty and contradictory or easily reversible forms of behavior which, in turn,

lead to increased levels and new forms of violence. Fear, and the laughter it provokes, are often an effect of the ambiguity of lived experience: one is subject to this violence and yet, often in spite of oneself, one participates in its very production.

To the extent that, in a time of crisis, relations of domination conceal themselves behind figures of monstrosity, the absurd (*l'absurde*), and suffering, to laugh means not only to hypostasize domination, but also to mark the respondence between objectified violence and the fear that one endeavors to admit and avert. But as a magical imaginary and particular figure of superstition, laughter, derision, and mockery themselves harbor enormous possibilities for substitution, imitation, and falsification. They aim to travesty, avenge, scare the evil spirits and appease them, or to exercise reprisals on "the signs of the thing"[53] (*les signes de la chose*), which cannot be overcome otherwise. As rites of expiation, laughter, and derision give way to an imaginary well-being, they allow for distance between the subject who laughs and the object of mockery. The division thus realized is precisely what permits the laughing subject to regain possession of self and to wear the mask — that is, to become a stranger to this "thing" (*la chose*) that exercises domination — and then to deride torture, murder, and all other forms of wretchedness.

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2 Michel de Certeau, The Practice of Everyday Life, trans. Steven F. Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984); Fernand Braudel, The Structures of Everyday Life: The Limits of the Possible, trans. Miriam Kochan (London: Collins, 1979).

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4 Cf. World Bank, Sub-Saharan Africa: From Crisis to Sustainable Growth: A Long-Term Perspective Study (Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 1989).

5 See, for example, Frederick Cooper, "Africa and the World Economy", African Studies Review 24, nos. 2-3 (1981). See also John Lonsdale, "States and Social Processes in Africa," African Studies Review 24, nos. 2-3 (1981).

6 See, however, Zaki Laïdi, L´ordre mondial relâché (Paris: Seuil, 1992); "Points de vue sur le système monde", special issue of Cahier du GEMDEV 20 (1993); Arjun Appadurai, "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy," Public Culture 2, no. 2 (1990), pp. 1-24.

7 By "return to the field" we are not necessarily referring to anthropologists' debates on the construc tion of the object of study and their trenchant critique of the supposed objective character of that object. In our opinion, the point that the researcher is implicated in the demarcation and construc tion of the object of study goes without saying. Cf. George E. Marcus and Michael M. J. Fischer, Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986); James Clifford and George E. Marcus, Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

8 This epistemological problem also concerns claims to knowledge based on founding oppositions, which impose order on, and preclude the legitimate status of, unrelatedness and unsystematicity, reversibility and surprise, inconclusiveness and the plurality of social time and space, which in turn leads to often problematic distinctions between levels of reality, everyday practices, and extraordinary experiences.

9 We are not describing havoc in Cameroon. We are trying to underline the materiality of the crisis in order to then look at its representational effects.

10 We are not asserting that this proliferation is without precedent. At this point in the discussion, we want to emphasize the relationship between the crisis in meaning and references, on the one hand, and the problem of criteria for efficacious action on the other.

11 On certain aspects of these processes, consult the cases in Peter Geschiere and Piet Konings, Itinéraires d´accumulation au Cameroun/Paths of Accumulation in Cameroon (Paris: Karthala, 1993).

12 Jean-Pierre Warnier, L´esprit d'entreprise au Cameroun (Paris: Karthala, 1993).

13 This process has been best described and interpreted by Jean-Francois Bayart, L'Etat au Cameroun (Paris: Presses de la Fondation Nationale des Sciences Politiques, 1979).

14 For a purely geographic point of view on this subject, see the study by E. Tazo, "La circulation routière à Yaoundé", Master's thesis, Université de Yaoundé, 1980.

15 "... un tourbillon de poussière rouge dont le piéton suffoque et qui colle aux vêtements, quitte à se transformer en une boue épaisse, plus collante encore, à la moindre pluie, intempérie plus que

fréquente." Mongo Beti, La France contre l'Afrique, retour au Cameroun (Paris: La Découverte, 1993), p. 61, our translation.

16 For a technocratic reading of these practices, see Xavier Godard and Pierre Teurnier, Les transports urbains en Afrique á l´heure de l´ajustement (Paris: Karthala-INRETS, 1992).

17 The point is not that they are done improperly, but rather that they are done under certain circum stances and according to a particular level of infrastructure.

18 In the sense in which Jean Baudrillard speaks of a "sign function" (finction-signe), a function that refers to a "class logic." See Pour une critique de l'economie politique du signe (Paris: Gallimard, 1972).

19 At a meeting of public officials and merchants, one official commented, "SONEL [the national electricity company] is going to cut us off. It's shameful; the administrative center of the province in darkness. ... and SONEL always acts with its sister, SNEC [the national water company]. They will cut the water off. It's the lifeline of humanity, it's the life of the cattle, it's death, it's tragic." Later, he commented on the rise of vandalism, noting that "If SONEL cuts [the electricity], there will be theft, murders ... living in fear. You are the ones who will be living in insecurity." A merchant responded, "they'll be able to come into our houses to take what they want. So, you've seen Zaire. I'm asking you to pay [taxes] if you don't want problems like they have in Zaire, where famine is starting to threaten, and civil servants have started to make noise [the military being included as civil servants]." Janet Roitman, from notes of discussions in Maroua, Cameroon, April 15, 1993.

20 See the studies by Anne-Sidonie Zoa, "Les ordures à Yaoundé. Jalons pour une garbéologie africaine", Master's thesis, Université de Yaoundé, 1993; and T. Tang, "L´évacuation des eaux usées á Yaoundé", Master's thesis, Université de Yaoundé, 1990.

21 "Aujord'hui, ce qui fut le quai aux grumes est envahi par les buissons d'herbes folles; l'arrivage du bois par flottage, spectacle dont venaient se repaître les écoliers de la ville, dont j'étais, appartient au passé. Un fléau mystérieux a chassé les exploitants forestiers blancs. Les comptoirs et les bazars grouillant de chalands rustiques et avides ont disparu ainsi que leurs gérants à peau claire, toujours dédaigneux, jamais empressés. Mbalmayo n'est plus que le fantôme de ce qu´il fut, sorte de Far- West poussiéreux et pouilleux." Beti, La France contre l´Afrique, pp. 56-57, our translation.

22 See the narrative of David Nouwou, "Voyage au coeur d'un monstré économique mort" La Nouvelle Expression 56 (June—July 1992), p. 11.

23 All figures are based on exchange rates prior to the devaluation of the franc CFA in 1994.

24 Refer to the observations made by Daniel Atangana, "Des milliards enterrés," Galaxie 48 (June 1993), p. 6.

25 Until recently, the combined salaries of the six French directors of the DGTC amounted to 22.5 million francs CFA (US$90,000) per month. Cf. Jean de Dieu Sibafo, "Bâtiments et travaux publics: DGTC, l'édifice s'effondre inexorablement," La Nouvelle Expression 81 (July 1993), p. 8.

26 Yamdeu, "Grande bamboula pour Tchouta Moussa," Soleil d'Afrique 24 (July 1993), pp. 6-8. The author describes ceremonies organized to "salute in grand pomp" the nomination of Tchouta Moussa to the head of the Office National des Ports du Cameroun. To celebrate this nomination "with éclat," Tchouta Moussa was able to mobilize members of the government, thirty-six traditional chiefs, and businessmen. In a more general sense, see Achille Mbembe, "Provisional Notes on the Postcolony," Africa 62, no. 1 (1992), pp. 3-37.

27 Georges Bataille, La part maudite, précédé de la notion de dépense (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1967), p. 29.

28 But one could also argue that, since this opens contradictory fields of potential action, certain forms might counter this tendency.

29 Eyoum Ngangue, "Péage routier: Les limites d'un nouveau racket," Le Messager 326 (September 1993), p. 5.

30 A. C. Fomi, "Lettre ouverte au ministre des finances," Dikalo 82 (July 1993), p. 15.

31 H. L. Bateg, "Impayés du telephone: Qui va payer la note?" Dikalo 83 (July 1993), p. 7. Also, M. Waffo, "La SIC aux trousses des locataires indélicats," Challenge Bi-Hebdo 95 (July 1993), p. 8.

32 The latter being intoned in the same way one says, "I have a cold."

33 Cornelius Castoriadis, L´institution imaginaire de la société (Paris: Seuil, 1972).

34 "Il y a seulement quelques années, les choses n'étaient pas comme maintenant."

35 Here we are referring to combinatory effects and, eventually, the production of another kind of system and not simply a parallel one.

36 In this sense, it is fallacious to consider them purely and simply in terms of survival strategies or as acts of resistance, as does James C. Scott, Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

37 Conversations with Jean Marc Ela, Vianney Ombe Ndzana, Thierno Mouctar Bah, Yaoundé, July 1993.

38 The experience of the authors, Cameroon, July 1993.

39 In an entirely different context, this point is also suggested by Darius M. Rejali, Torture and Modernity: Self Society and State in Modern Iran (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994), pp. 42-44, 61.

40 Eyoum Ngangue, "Taximen contre policiers: Combat de rue ou guerre de tranchées?" Le Messager 315 (July 1993), p. 11.

41 Jean-Marc Soboth, "Fonctionnaires: La fin des patates," La Nouvelle Expression 87 (August 1993), p.6.

42 Janet Roitman, notes, Maroua, 1992-93. In a more general sense, cf. Béatrice Fraenkel, La signature: Genèse d'un signe (Paris: Gallimard, 1992). However, she considers the signature only in the sacred terms of a new conception of identity and recognition of the singularity of the human being.

43 Contrary to Nicolas van de Waite, in "The Politics of Nonreform in Cameroon," in Hemmed In: Responses to Africa's Economic Decline, ed. Thomas Callaghy and John Ravenhill (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), pp. 357-397.

44 Francois-Regis Mahieu, "Principes économiques et société africaine," Tiers-Monde 30, no. 120 (1989), pp. 725-753.

45 Michel Foucault, The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), p. 225.

46 Achille Mbembe, "Prosaics of Servitude and Authoritarian Civilities," Public Culture 5, no. 1 (1992), pp. 123-148.

47 This part of the discussion owes much to a series of conversations with Jean Marc Ela in Yaoundé during July and August 1993.

48 Present practice involves signing a roll call at various times during the day to establish theoretical presence while not actually being physically in the office or workplace throughout the day.

49 Cf. Richard A. Joseph, Radical Nationalism in Cameroon: Social Origins of the UPC Rebellion (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977); Bayart, Iltat au Cameroun; Achille Mbembe, La naissance du maquis dans le Sud-Cameroun, 1920-1960 (Paris: Karthala, 1996).

50 Cf. Peter Geschiere, Sorcellerie et politique en Afrique: La viande des autres (Paris: Karthala, 1995); Eric de Rosny, L'Afrique des guérisons (Paris: Karthala, 1992).

51 See "Un macchabée calciné a Yaoundé," Challenge Bi-Hebdo 106 (August 1993), P. 9; or C. Yaho, "Gangstérisme urbain: La justice populaire comme réponse a l'insecurité," La Nouvelle Expression 81 (July 1993), P. 4.

52 Cf. the popular caricatures found in the weekly Le Messager-Popoli: La version-image de l´actualié.. Also, Ferdinand Oyono, Une vie de boy (Paris: Julliard, 1956) and Le vieux nègre et la médaille (Paris: Julliard, 1956).

53 Martin Heidegger, Qu´est-ce une chose? (Paris: Gallimard, 1971).