"Out of Your System": After Lyotard's Libidinal Set-Ups

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In lieu of an introduction, let me start with an image. The scene is in France, in the city centre of a provincial metropolis, on a Saturday afternoon. A pedestrian shopping street is filled with a human tide massed for a day of shopping and leisure. Like every Saturday for a few weeks, this dense, uniform crowd of shoppers and onlookers is interrupted by another bright yellow stream gushing onto the avenue. These two streams form two perpendicular axes, the bright yellow stream segmenting the other axis in two black halves. And yet, by some optical mystery, these two halves seem to continue swarming as one, inexorable, continuous flow. How? Of course, large contingents of police in full riot gear and agents of the anti-crime brigades[1] strictly contain the bright yellow stream. Business can go on as usual amid the sound of grenades and the stench of tear gas. Why is it, though, that this stream of shoppers and passers-by seems to keep swarming undisturbed, when, sometimes three or four metres away, demonstrators are held at gunpoint, chased, held down, beaten, strangled, injured?

This image of two streams – the uniform dark stream of continuation, the yellow stream of disruption – will serve as a backdrop, not to address the Yellow Vests movement in itself but to assess the relevance of Jean-François Lyotard's libidinal economic framework for the 21st century. How helpful is this framework for understanding how the capitalist machinery organises flows and libidinal investments? What insights can it offer for reconsidering the conditions of possibility for a revolution of these arrangements of desire (or, to use a more appropriately Lyotardian term, of these libidinal set-ups)? Indeed, what about a wholesale revolution of the system? Finally, in reassessing the relevance of the libidinal framework today, what can be learned from Lyotard's own reassessment of his work?

Within the context of this volume, which sets out to enquire about the relevance of the libidinal economic framework in crisis times, it seems opportune to observe the trajectory of this framework across the works of one of its notorious theorists –

1 A section of the French national police, in Paris and other cities, dressed in civilian clothing, often moving on foot or in unmarked cars, and stopping people for street or "public order" offences and identity checks. These brigades have earned a negative reputation for their disproportionate use of provocation and violence against minorities and during demonstrations.

who, just as notoriously, abandoned the libidinal approach in favour of a pragmatics of phrases, in *The Differend* (1983) and onwards. By the 1980s, Lyotard deemed the libidinal approach he developed in the 1970s as a "metaphysics of forces."[2] *Libidinal Economy* (1974) was discarded as "my book of evilness" ("*mon livre méchant*")[3] and affect reframed as "affect-phrase."[4] Upon closer inspection, this opposition between the two frameworks is not as clear-cut as usually assumed. Traces of the libidinal often resurface in Lyotard's late prose, coexisting alongside other frameworks in more than one text.[5] Through a journey across three texts bridging the earlier and later periods of Lyotard's works, I will contend that he did not entirely reject the libidinal framework, but rather reserved its application for an original thinking of "the system."

Over time, Lyotard's initial transposition of the Freudian energetic model to socioeconomic set-ups evolves to make room for a generalised conceptualisation of the system. This shift situates Freudian libidinal economy in continuity with systemic models present in modern physics and evolutionary biology, as well as political economy. As we shall see, libidinal economy is not merely replaced with the phrastic framework and a thinking of infancy and unconscious affect; the libidinal framework persists, albeit in a secondary way, providing for a description of the forces that drive "the system," and coexisting alongside this later framework to allow for a thinking of the system's links with the question of terror.

1968: "March 23"

In August 1971, three years before publishing *Libidinal Economy*, Lyotard wrote an introduction to a book he never completed. Lyotard intended it to be a "history" of the Movement of March 22, a leftist movement generally considered one of the first

2 Jean-François Lyotard, "Emma: Between Philosophy and Psychoanalysis," trans. M. Sanders with R. Brons and N. Martin, in *Lyotard: Philosophy, Politics and the Sublime*, ed. Hugh Silverman (NY: Routledge, 2002), 34.

3 Jean-François Lyotard, *Peregrinations: Law, Form, Event* (NY: Columbia UP, 1988), 13.

4 Jean-François Lyotard, "The Affect-Phrase (From a Supplement to The Differend)," trans. Keith Crome, in *The Lyotard Reader and Guide*, ed. Keith Crome and James William (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2006).

5 For instance, in 1994, two major works of Lyotard's earlier "libidinal period" were reprinted with Galilée, both augmented with new prefaces by the author; in tone these are far from solely retrospective, let alone apologetic: *Dérives à partir de Marx et Freud* (partly translated as *Driftworks*), and *Des dispositifs pulsionnels* ("Libidinal Set-Ups"), originally published in 1973 and 1974 respectively. Neither of these books has been published extensively in English, but selected essays have been translated and collected in *Driftworks*, ed. Richard McKeon (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 1984) and *Political Writings*, trans. and ed. Bill Readings with Kevin Paul Geiman (London: University College London, 1993).

student revolts of the year 1968 that led to the events of May.[6] Lyotard begins by locating his interest in the movement in its generalised critique of representation in the socio-political field – a critique not reserved for institutionalised forms of politics only, such as the party or the union, but understanding "politics" in the broadest sense, traversing all spheres of life and social activity. While Lyotard distances himself from what he considers to be the movement's naïve ideal of a life beyond any form of mediation and representation, governed only by spontaneity, immediacy, and autonomy, he applauds the movement's critical power. He perceives this precisely as an invitation to "get beyond the opposition between spontaneity and mediation, between the masses and the apparatus, between life and the institution," and develop new critical weapons. And he adds, "With Freud (but not with Marcuse or Reich), one can begin to perceive and roughly sketch out that 'beyond' that Marx left undeveloped."[7] To take up this challenge, Lyotard turns to Freud to elaborate a thought of the institution as an energetic system, and to find in his libidinal economy an alternative to the symbolic and semantic models put forward by structural linguistics. These, to Lyotard, did not allow thinking the event's force, or – which amounts to the same thing – thinking the event as force.[8]

In the early economic model developed in the *Project for a Scientific Psychology* (1895), Freud describes the psychic apparatus as a regulator of energies that captures (channels or represses) the unbound energies of the drives. Likewise, Lyotard proposes considering socioeconomic institutions according to an energetic model:

> One can imagine any society as an ensemble of persons ruled by a system whose function would be to regulate the entry, the distribution, and the elimination of the energy that this ensemble spends in order to exist. "Objects" … would be specifications, concretions of this energy; institutions would be operators that make this energy usable by the ensemble, make it circulate within. The institution, far from being only what presents itself as such to the observer, would in general be any stable formation, explicit or not, transforming incoming energy into bound energy within a given field of the circulation of objects.[9]

6 On March 22, 1968, students occupied the administrative building of Université Paris Nanterre in protest of the arrest of six activists against the Vietnam War. The "Movement of March 22," a spontaneist movement using direct action methods and refusing institutionalisation, was founded three days later. Lyotard's text was published under the title "*Le 23 Mars*" ("March 23") in the 1973 collection *Dérives à partir de Marx et Freud* (Paris: Galilée, 1994), 107–115, and was included in the English volume of Lyotard's *Political Writings*.

7 Lyotard, "March 23," 63.

8 Lyotard, "March 23," 64.

9 Lyotard, "March 23," 63.

Lyotard defines societies as being governed by such systems (economic systems of exchange, social institutions), which are designed to capture, transform, or eliminate energies. Capitalism is but one such system of regulation. It has the property of being "structured as a regulator of growth."[10] Capitalism allows, in principle, the introduction and elimination of ever-increasing quantities of energy.

In this context, Lyotard proposes defining an event as "the impact, on the system, of floods of energy such that the system does not manage to bind and channel this energy."[11] In the case of the capitalist system, Lyotard ascribes such a failure to process incoming energies to two possible configurations. The first configuration involves the capitalist system's friction with "precapitalist social regions," such as religion, family, or labour, which the system fails to integrate because they are incompatible with its principle of exchange value.[12] Lyotard immediately notes that this configuration no longer seems decisive at the end of the 20th century, when capitalism has largely made these institutions obsolete.

The second configuration is internal to the system and occurs when the incoming energy no longer lets itself be "captured, bound or circulated in the 'objects' of the system."[13] The cause of this failure to bind incoming energies can lie either in an overload of energies, or in a defect of the regulatory system itself. Crises of overproduction, where the quantities of incoming energy are too significant to be processed by the system, are an example of a crisis induced by an energy overload. Lyotard notes that while they can gravely endanger the system, such crises ultimately reinforce it. Analysing them "provides the system with the chance to improve its capacity to bind energy."[14] However, next to this quantitative order of events, Lyotard notes the existence of "a much more enigmatic, qualitative order of events."[15] In these, the failure to channel incoming energies does not come from an overabundance of these energies, but from the qualitative incapability of the regulating system itself – which used to function perfectly until, inexplicably, it no longer did.

In drawing an analogy between the libidinal economy laid out by Freud and his own energetic account of social regulation, Lyotard reintroduces the libidinal within socioeconomic mechanisms, and posits that any social system is underpinned by a position of desire. He writes, "the objects that appear within the system are set up so that desire … is fulfilled in their production and in their destruction."[16] Describing the energetic system that regulates societies as a system that channels libidinal

10 Lyotard, "March 23," 64.
11 Lyotard, "March 23," 64.
12 Lyotard, "March 23," 64.
13 Lyotard, "March 23," 64.
14 Lyotard, "March 23," 65.
15 Lyotard, "March 23," 65.
16 Lyotard, "March 23," 65.

fluxes into objects allows Lyotard to elaborate an explanation for this second qualitative order of events: it is "an inexplicable mutation in the position of desire," whereby desire can no longer be fulfilled or repressed in the objects that used to channel it.[17] The institution, as a regulating system, mysteriously becomes unable to bind and process the incoming energy. Although the system used to function perfectly, it suddenly became obsolete.

May '68 is an event according to all three configurations. A symptom of crises in universities and society at large, this anti-institutional movement, by attempting to propose solutions, is also bound to become an institution itself and thus contribute to regulating energies. To Lyotard, the specificity and import of the movement of March 22 does not lie in its political impact – whereby it is bound to reinforce the system – but precisely in its anti-political work and unbinding potentialities: "it owes its proper dimension to the space that it has created, even though it is minimal and violated by ideologies, for a mutation in the relationship between what is desired and what is given, between potential energy and the social machinery."[18] May '68, to a certain extent, disrupted how the system channelled energies and involved a qualitative mutation in the position of desire, which had the potential to make the system obsolete. As an event, it opened the possibility of undoing the system; even the possibility of its collapse, Lyotard dares to say (with considerable precautions).

This utopian revolutionary opening, afforded by the unbinding work of the death drive, is immediately obfuscated by the weight of ideologies, and a certain sense of discomfort can be felt throughout the text of Lyotard's incomplete introduction. When he participated in the Movement of March 22, Lyotard had already left *Socialisme ou Barbarie*. He had dedicated twelve years of his life to this radical Marxist group and had, by 1968, lost faith in the revolutionary destiny of the proletariat and a global alternative to the capitalist system.[19] "March 23" and other texts of the period seek to develop an alternative to the Marxist framework's perceived loss of relevance for the late 20th century – and perhaps save the idea of a revolution. The texts bear the trace of this tenacious scepticism. While this theory shows that a mutation in the position of desire is necessary for a revolution of the system, it fails to identify possible causes for such a mutation, let alone strategies to precipitate it. Eventually,

17 Lyotard, "March 23," 65.

18 Lyotard, "March 23," 65.

19 In his new preface to the 1994 re-edition of *Dérives à partir de Marx et Freud* with Galilée (9–10), Lyotard bears witness to this uncomfortable gap between his intimate theoretical conviction and his active participation to the movement. It is in his tribute to Pierre Souyri titled "A Memorial for Marxism" that Lyotard accounts in most detail for this progressive loss of faith in the Marxist framework for "understanding and transforming the new direction taken by the world after the Second World War," and his *différend* with his Marxist friends: "A Memorial for Marxism," trans. Cecile Lindsay, in *Peregrinations: Law, Form, Event* (NY: Columbia UP, 1988), 45–75.

Lyotard will renounce the revolutionary perspective to adopt a position favouring "resistance." The libidinal framework is not discarded with this shift but rather reassessed and recast within a broader evolutionary perspective to produce an original and powerful theory of "the system."

Globalisation: "Déluge Warning"

In December 1993, Lyotard wrote a new preface for the third edition of *Des Dispositifs Pulsionnels*,[20] 20 years after the collection was first published. Titled "*Avis de Déluge*" ("Déluge Warning"), the new preface reassesses and reinvests in the libidinal framework that Lyotard had seemingly set aside for almost two decades. The notion of libidinal set-up relied on an analogy: Lyotard transposed Freud's metapsychology to social and representational systems. By recontextualising Freud's economic hypothesis within the history of ideas, showing its indebtedness to modern physics and evolutionary biology, and reminding his readers of the historic filiation of evolutionary biology and liberal economics, Lyotard suggests that this transposition is not to be entirely discarded as a theoretical *coup de force*. On the contrary, by representing the psychic apparatus according to the model of an energetic system, "Freud did more than a comparison. He grafted the dynamics that affect souls directly onto those of 'inert' living or social bodies."[21]

Freud's theories are marked by the physical understanding of human physiology that prevailed in the German-speaking world in the 19th century. The model of the psychic apparatus developed in the *Project for a Scientific Psychology* is indebted to the psychophysical research in stimulus-response undertaken by Gustav Fechner and Ernst Weber; the hypothesis of the death drive developed in 1920 in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* accounts for the principle of entropy formulated in the second law of thermodynamics.[22] Lyotard notes that, in applying the systemic hypothesis to the living, Freud also drew inspiration from Charles Darwin and Herbert Spencer. They, in turn, derived their inspiration from the first theoreticians of eco-

20 Jean-François Lyotard, "Avis de Déluge," in *Des dispositifs pulsionnels* (Paris: Galilée, 1994). All translations are mine. The second edition of this volume appeared with Christian Bourgois in 1980.

21 Lyotard, "Avis de Déluge," 11.

22 See Jessica Tran The, Pierre Magistretti, and François Ansermet, "The Epistemological Foundations of Freud's Energetics Model," *Frontiers in Psychology* 9 (October 2018); Jessica Tran The et al., "From the Principle of Inertia to the Death Drive: The Influence of the Second Law of Thermodynamics on the Freudian Theory of the Psychical Apparatus," *Frontiers in Psychology* 11 (February 2020). Lyotard mentioned Fechner and Weber's psychophysics and the import of thermodynamics in "Avis de Déluge," 9 and 11, respectively.

nomic liberalism, Thomas Malthus, Adam Smith, and David Ricardo.[23] Demographics, economics, evolutionary biology, psychophysics – Lyotard describes how a systemic worldview based on mechanical flow, energy exchange and regulation, performativity,[24] and adaptation takes precedence across all fields in the natural and human sciences in the late 18th and 19th centuries. As a result, living beings and societies are regarded as part of a continuum of material systems designed to transform energy and regulate its input and output to optimise its relations with its environment, integrated in an evolutionary perspective.[25] "All matter," writes Lyotard, "is energy concretized in a system. Some systems are enormous, such as the galaxies; others, such as unicellular terrestrial beings, are miniscule." He adds that "all are subject to the principle of entropy: when incoming energy runs out, internal differentiation can no longer be sustained, and the system disappears … in chaos."[26] Like all systems, human communities risk decomposing and dying if they are no longer supplied with energy; they also seek to optimise their performance to delay this moment.

From unicellular beings to posthuman computers, Lyotard now regards evolution as one long, continuous history of complexification, of which the human psyche is but one stasis – a complexification that, in *Postmodern Fables* (1997), he imagines will continue until "the big solar explosion" destroys the earth in four billion years.[27] Within this picture, the capitalist set-up of liberal democracies is no longer one among various ways to regulate the energies necessary for the system and to control potentially unsettling events, as was the case in Lyotard's earlier descriptions: rather, it is now considered the latest and most up-to-date organisational form of an ever complexifying energetic system. As opposed to other forms of social organisation, this system can always adapt: "it is programmed to capture new sources of natural energy" and optimise the productivity of human labour.[28] Lyotard now views this form of organisation as irreversible: all crises are occasions

23 Darwin's influence on Freud as well as the influence of the liberal economists on Darwin has been widely studied. See, for instance, Lucille B. Ritvo, *Darwin's Influence on Freud: A Tale of Two Sciences* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1990); Silvan S. Schweber, "Darwin and the Political Economists: Divergence of Character," *Journal of the History of Biology* 13, no. 2 (1980).

24 In *The Postmodern Condition*, Lyotard defines "performativity" as "the optimisation of the global relationship between input and output," that is, a principle according to which the system constantly improves its performance/efficiency. This, he states, is "the true goal of the system" and the only alternative to entropy: Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 11–12.

25 Lyotard, "Avis de Déluge," 9.

26 Lyotard, "Avis de Déluge," 11.

27 Jean-François Lyotard, "A Postmodern Fable," in *Postmodern Fables*, trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

28 Lyotard, "Avis de Déluge," 12.

to improve its efficiency. In this updated framework, the possibility of a sudden "qualitative" mutation of the regulatory system – the possibility of a revolution – seems to have disappeared.

It could seem that the libidinal framework has been entirely diluted, even liquidated, within this predominantly mechanistic panorama. However, if Lyotard elaborates an energetic theory of "the system" that governs the West, shedding light on the ideological roots that underlie its functioning (such as input/output optimisation, efficiency, and competitiveness), he also theorises the crucial contribution made by Freudian thought for understanding the unconscious motives that drive this system. Indeed, "with the hypothesis of the drives, Freud complicates the mechanistic picture" inherited from Fechnerian psychophysics.[29] Freud postulates that the channelling of energetic flows is not a simple matter of engineering but that it is rushed by the anxiety about flooding the system. As opposed to the external energies that are fed into mechanical systems according to a model of input–output (or stimulus–response), the source of the drive is not external but internal; it is not intermittent but constant, and can only be attested through its psychic effects, as it activates representations. The psychic apparatus is designed to regulate and transform these internal energies. It builds barriers to avoid the self becoming submerged by the constant thrust of the drives: "the psychic apparatus supports itself by repressing a threatening overflow."[30]

Lyotard associates this erratic overflow of energies with the polymorphous perversity defined by Freud in his 1905 *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*. This perversity is characteristic of infantile sexuality, before the Ego is formed and defence mechanisms set in, before the *infans* gradually learns to channel libidinal flows towards specific outlets rather than others. And as we shall see, this turn to infantile sexuality will allow Lyotard to connect the libidinal framework developed in the 1970s with a thinking of affect (or *infantia*) based on a model of primary repression developed in other texts after *The Differend*. The philosopher notes that Eros (the principle of organisation, cohesion, and complexification) and the death drive (which tends to bring the living back to an anorganic state by suppressing all tensions) are two regimes according to which the tension occasioned by this overflow of energies can be solved. As mentioned earlier, Freud's 1920 formulation of the death drive accounts for the principle of entropy formulated with the second law of thermodynamics: Eros and the death drive are *mutatis mutandis* psychoanalytical names for negentropy and entropy. Emphasising the structural similarities of Freud's theory of the psychic apparatus with principles governing other systemic organisations, Lyotard postulates that any activity regulating the energetic flows within a system

29 Lyotard, "Avis de Déluge," 9.

30 Lyotard, "Avis de Déluge," 10: "Le dispositif psychique se soutient de refouler un débordement menaçant."

is based on repressing an anxiety: namely, the system's submersion under a déluge of undifferentiated energy.

This provides Lyotard with a framework to describe the situation of the West at the turn of the millennium:

> [After the crisis of 1929], it became obvious that global capitalism had to find remedies to so-called overproduction other than speculation, unemployment, totalitarianisms, and, ultimately, the massacre of about sixty million human beings. After its reconstruction, the system worked, euphoric about its growth, oblivious of its crimes. But now it finds itself confronted with the turn of the millennium; and for a long time, with a double, deadly threat: the necessity of integrating and employing the potential energies localised in the Third World and in what is left of the Second after the collapse of the Soviet empire, on the one hand; and on the other hand, the urgency of solving the question, this time internal, of employment within the so-called developed regions of the world, where technoscientific development makes an ever-increasing proportion of the traditional human workforce once and for all useless. All it needs is brains and fingers skilled with the keyboard.
>
> Here again is the anxiety of an outpouring of undifferentiated energy … All barriers built against this rising tide bear the mark of *this* anxiety: foreigners, nobodies, pariahs, anything that proliferates, has no home, no job … is filtered, repressed, sometimes foreclosed.[31]

Thirty years later, this diagnosis continues to resonate cruelly with the realities of the necropolitical governance prevalent in Western countries. By shedding light on the scientific and ideological roots of a systemic vision of the world, Lyotard develops a framework that allows us to account for the obsession with flows and performativity that drives the West and serves as a justification to turn the lives of billions of human beings, in what is now called the Global South and in increasing fractions of Western countries, into disposable energies.

This theoretical framework goes beyond the libidinal, properly speaking, and mobilises what Lyotard calls a global "political economy of forces."[32] However, it includes and builds on an analysis of the capitalist libidinal economy. It allows us to see how capitalist liberalism is sustained by a lifting of inhibitions and a liberation of libidinal flows – on the condition, Lyotard emphasises, "that these put the system to work (*fassent travailler le système*)" and increase its performativity.[33] Everything that escapes the law of the exchange – the absolute, the Law, the erratic flow of energies that threaten to overflow, death, infancy – is foreclosed. Before further exploring

31 Lyotard, "Avis de Déluge," 12.

32 Lyotard, "Avis de Déluge," 13.

33 Lyotard, "Avis de Déluge," 13.

the consequences of the challenges outlined by Lyotard and questioning their relevance today, I will turn to one last text, where Lyotard explores the link between the capitalist system's libidinal economy and the question of terror and totalitarianism.

"The system" and the question of terror: "Survivor"

In 1988, the Goethe Institute in Paris invited Lyotard to speak about the works of Hannah Arendt.[34] Lyotard titled his lecture "Survivor" (*Survivant*); he devoted the end of this intervention to considering Arendt's treatment of totalitarianism, in a way that unexpectedly brings Freud's economic framework into play.

In *Between Past and Future* (first published in 1961), Arendt compares the organisation of the totalitarian system to the structure of an onion.[35] Unlike the pyramidal structure of authoritarianism, or the structure of tyranny, which places the ruler above everyone else, totalitarianism is organised in concentric strata. The leader is placed at the core, and each subsequent stratum is marked by decreasing degrees of commitment and radicality; the further removed it is from the centre, the less extremist, the more "realist" each stratum appears to the previous strata, and vice versa. Such a structure, according to Arendt, allows the totalitarian system to be shielded from potential threats posed by the factuality of the real world. Lyotard suggests that this onion-like shielding structure likens totalitarianism to an apparatus designed to block excitations: "Hypothetically, politics could change reality; totalitarian politics could change it totally: when the onion, a system of complete (two-way) filtering of the real, with the aim of transforming reality into ideology or culture."[36] At this point, Lyotard departs from Arendt's model and analysis to propose a Freudian reading of the totalitarian system. Lyotard suggests that what requires filtering is not the factuality of reality but the excitations – the anxiety – it produces.

But what, within the so-called "real world," could cause an anxiety so great that it could lead to the extermination of millions? To Lyotard, an external description of the mechanisms of the totalitarian system is insufficient, as is merely describing them in energetic terms as an apparatus of repression or filtering. He aims to locate the *source* of the anxiety he has identified. And to him, facts (or groups of people) are not anxiety-producing in themselves; they only produce anxiety and activate mechanisms of repression insofar as they awaken something foreclosed at the system's core. Here, Lyotard turns away from the libidinal economic framework to em-

34 Jean-François Lyotard, "Survivor: Arendt," trans. Robert Harvey and Kiff Bamford, in *Readings in Infancy*, eds. Robert Harvey and Kiff Bamford (London: Bloomsbury, 2023), 39–60.

35 Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (NY: Penguin Books, 1993), 99–100.

36 Lyotard, "Survivor," 53.

brace a thinking of *Nachträglichkeit* (belatedness) and originary repression, which had become prevalent in his works after *The Differend*. This framework allows him to think the persistence, within the psychic apparatus yet unbeknownst to it, of an unconscious affect, a Thing (*das Ding*, in the Lacanian sense), bound to elude consciousness. Establishing a parallel between the structures of Western thought and the psychic apparatus, Lyotard postulates an unconscious affect at the core of Western thought that escapes the grasp of consciousness; an immanent terror that is not identified as such, forever irrepresentable, immemorial.[37] And he concludes that "for such a powerful instrument of foreclosure, of forgetting, as totalitarianism to be fabricated, the Thing must appear extremely threatening…. That is where the origin of totalitarianism is to be found."[38]

Lyotard also concludes by suggesting that this source of the spirit of totalitarianism did not run dry with the defeat of historic totalitarian regimes. Indeed, he identifies ways in which the spirit of totalitarianism survives today, two of which I will now briefly outline. First, Arendt shows that totalitarian systems do not maintain their power via professional criminals but from a well-organised mass of conscientious employees. To Lyotard, these "philistines" are "ordinary folk" for whom busyness is a diversion (in a Pascalian sense) from any consciousness of nothingness, or of an ontological debt.[39] And, of course, Lyotard suggests that this was just as true for the 1930s as it was at the end of the 20th century. In both eras, the mind's forces are *put to use* and exclusively geared towards a so-called *active life* – indeed, towards business and entertainment. Second, in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), Arendt argues that terror is the realisation of laws of movement, whose aim is neither the wellbeing of humans in general nor the interest of one person in particular, but the fabrication of humankind. With totalitarianism, Nature or History are no longer sources of authority stabilising people's actions. Instead, they are regarded as movements, supra-human forces called upon to justify that terror is mobilised to realise their law, and that groups of people be eliminated to allow for fabricating humankind. All energies are mobilised towards that goal. Lyotard claims that the contemporary system no longer requires lives to be exterminated for all energies to

37 Lyotard outlines this analogy between the unconscious affect haunting the psychic apparatus and the "immanent terror" most precisely in *Heidegger and "the Jews,"* trans. Andreas Michel and Mark Roberts, (Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1990). See in particular sections 5 to 7, 15–23. For an account of Lyotard's thinking on affect, see Claire Nouvet, "The Inarticulate Affect. Lyotard and Psychoanalytic Testimony," in *Minima Memoria. Essays in the Wake of Jean-François Lyotard*, ed. Claire Nouvet, Kent Still, and Zrinka Stahuljak (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2007), 106–122. See also Claire Nouvet, "For 'Emma,'" in *Traversals of Affect: On Jean-François Lyotard*, ed. Julie Gaillard, Claire Nouvet, and Mark Stoholski (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 37–54.

38 Lyotard, "Survivor," 53–4.

39 Lyotard, "Survivor," 54.

be mobilised towards its goal. Development is a law of movement that maximises the effect described by Arendt of a total mobilisation of all energies against entropy, according to a criterion of performativity.[40] As such, human beings are valued as productive energies, while as legal, moral, or singular persons, they are superfluous.

However, following Ernst Jünger, Lyotard argues that the democratic system and the adjustment of the law towards elevating living standards are much more powerful strategies for mobilisation than the totalitarian tools of the 1930s because they are much more acceptable to ordinary people. Propaganda is replaced by the soft rhetorics of seemingly pluralistic media. Interfaces are multiplied, no longer according to the structure of an onion, but now in networks. Delays between stimuli and responses are reduced to a level where they become imperceptible – everything happens "in real time." In the contemporary system, space and time are saturated – a saturation that, Lyotard suggests, is precisely designed to fend off excitations and repress anything that would diminish the system's efficiency:

> Massificaiton and survival, mobilization and saturation, and foreclosure are obtained more efficiently by an organization through communicational networks than by totalitarian politics. I know how brutal this diagnosis is. I very well that development is indeed a development with regard to a traditional society. I am aware of the advantages of democracy.[41]

Of course, Lyotard's analysis does not amount to naively equating the system of contemporary development with historic totalitarian regimes. In demonstrating certain analogies in their structures as well as similitudes in their function concerning this immanent, terrifying source, Lyotard suggests that one of their key differences lies in the fact that development does not – at least not for Western populations at the end of the 20th century – rely on terror to realise the law of its movement. But this does not mean it structurally excludes terror; it simply means that development as a law of movement does not need to resort to terror as long as democratic life provides for the most efficient mobilisation of energies.

As we have seen through this series of texts, the libidinal economic framework does not disappear entirely from Lyotard's writings after he allegedly abandons it in favour of a pragmatic framework. While the presence and import of Freud's economic model clearly remains marginal across Lyotard's works after *The Differend*, it is nevertheless an essential reference when describing the mechanisms of the capitalist system, combined with the energetic models inherited from evolutionary biology and thermodynamics. Should Lyotard's diagnosis of the capitalist system's ir-

40 Lyotard, "Survivor," 56.

41 Lyotard, "Survivor," 58.

reversibility – that is, his loss of faith in the possibility of a global revolution – be discarded among the discourses on "the end of history" and situated in the context of the collapse of the Soviet block and late 20th-century globalisation? On the contrary, his diagnosis – which precludes a global revolutionary perspective, but not local movements of resistance – anticipated developments 21st-century neoliberalism and the corollary surge of anxiety and revivification of terror that the world faces today.

In lieu of a conclusion, let me finish with an image. A bright yellow stream gushes into the avenue, interrupting a black stream of consumers and onlookers. A bright yellow crowd occupies a periurban roundabout, blocking the productive flows of individuals and goods irrigating the system. Yet, if we consider the irruption of the Yellow Vests movement as an event in Lyotard's sense – in the sense of a flood of energies such that the regulating system does not manage to process or bind them – then this event is "quantitative," and not "qualitative." Sociologically, the heterogeneous Yellow Vests movement comprises precarious or proletarianised workers from the lower middle classes with no prior activist experience.[42] They belong to a group that used to take pride in working hard and making do, but for whom capitalism no longer bears a promise of material comfort and upward mobility. They now demand that their lives be considered more than merely energies to feed the system. In a country where mechanisation and 40 years of deindustrialisation have led to a chronic unemployment rate of ten per cent, in a system where humans are not primarily regarded as citizens endowed with rights but as resources to be managed to generate growth, their revolt states that the system is no longer tolerable to the humans that compose it. Initially, the Yellow Vests movement did not involve a demand for a revolution of the system but a demand that the promises of social justice, equality, and dignity (associated with the imaginary of the French Revolution) be upheld, and for reforms that would allow the workers' inclusion in democratic life and socioeconomic prosperity.[43] This movement only confirms Lyotard's observation that social struggles at the turn of the 21st century are no longer struggles to acquire more rights. They are struggles to defend rights already acquired – or to demand that the equality of rights be transformed into real equality. And this makes all the more worrisome the violent repression that the protesters' demands have met.

Outlining the "political economy of forces" and the challenges that would arise with globalisation in the 21st century, Lyotard noted that it would be necessary to reorganise the set-ups designed to channel forces in the system to integrate the vast amounts of energies from the former Soviet regime and the rest of the world. At the

42 For a detailed description of the sociological profile of the Yellow Vests, see Laurent Jeanpierre, *In Girum. Les leçons politiques des ronds-points* (Paris: La Découverte, 2019), 73–89.

43 Symbols of the French Revolution have been massively reactivated by participants of this movement.

end of his 1993 preface to the third re-edition of *Des dispositifs pulsionnels*, he asked, "Who can say that such a challenge will be overcome, and how? Will it be possible to avoid new massacres? Won't the principle of international law soon appear inappropriate for 'good' management of flows?"[44] Obviously, the tens of thousands of people dying at the gates of Europe, the walls built throughout the West, and the number of people maimed or killed in the repression of democratic movements in France and elsewhere, 25 years after Lyotard's text was written, provide a negative answer. The system perfectly accommodates right-wing populist movements, nationalist rationales, and authoritative regimes. Their racism, walls, and borders contribute to reinforcing the system's efficiency; they afford eliminating surplus flows of humans whose energies are no longer useful to the system. On the contrary, when the discontent caused by the inhuman mechanisms of the system is expressed as a demand for respect for human rights and democracy, then these demands are repressed – they endanger the system, as democracy no longer contributes to increasing the efficiency of the system but, rather, tends to slow it down.

Lyotard's theory shows that the inhumanity of neoliberal governance is not an unfortunate side effect of its rule of performativity. The system is a powerful machine precisely designed to foreclose any event that would escape its grasp and control, anything that cannot be integrated to enhance its efficiency. It is designed to repress the immemorial, immanent, constitutive terror at the core of humans and humanity. Until the end of Lyotard's career, Freud's economic framework remained a useful tool to describe how this "forgetting" is organised. However, most of Lyotard's conceptual effort would focus on bearing witness to the Thing that escapes any memory and phrasing. And this act of bearing witness, a crucial, yet minuscule act of political resistance, is no longer a matter of energy or desire.

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44 Lyotard, "Avis de Déluge," 13.

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