Yellow Coal

How can the constant bombardment of shock and emergency and suffering in our world be harnessed as a source of power and collective strength? How do we act and unite in a world that constantly isolates and shocks us, destroying the very ecological and social systems in which we survive? Post Brothers examines how dissociated social interactions are translated into value and yellow coal channels emotions as a form of power.

Essay / Post Brothers June 25, 2021

Sigizmund Krzhizhanovsky's 1939 short story *Yellow Coal* recounts the discovery of a new global energy source, cheaper and more plentiful than anything else: human spite, anxiety, hatred, aggression, and suffering, the immaterial residue of nasty interactions concentrated into limitless power. To tap this energy, society redesigns private and public space and social interactions to induce bad feelings and proliferates "absorberators" to channel these streams of animosity and anger on local and global scales. By reframing bodily and ecological economics, Krzhizhanovsky suggests a link between the social, psychological, and ecological, where the mood and relations between entities are treated as objects with profound energetic agency.1

Given the reality that, at many different and enmeshed levels, the world today is in a state of continuous crisis, this prognosticating satire offers a unique solution to our own political and ecological emergencies. Tapping into the infinite, sustainable, and renewable resource of socio-psychic trauma, the story turns this excess of hardship into an optimistic one. Instability permeates all levels of our lives. Where once modernity may have sought to establish a sense of security, the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman has pointed out that this state of continuous disturbance and transformation has become an integral part of our world, where "uncertainty (has become) the only certainty."2 Our time can be described as one of increasing precarity, producing subjects defined by their vulnerability, and threatening complex ecologies and systems. This vulnerability is unevenly distributed among and across different bodies and produced through overlapping conditions of power. With the unprecedented situation of COVID-19, environmental disaster, mass migrations, war, political strife, economic instability, the eruption of collective uprisings, and spontaneous events of destruction, it is clear that this constant turmoil and suffering will only increase. Extraordinary conditions have become the norm, and these events are regularly exploited by both state and capital to push through abhorrent policies and restructurings, what Naomi Klein refers to as neoliberalism's "shock doctrine."3 There is no such thing as a "natural" disaster today, every crisis is inextricably linked to the material and symbolic flows of global capitalism. Extraordinary circumstances like the pandemic or extreme weather events, amplify the normalized disasters in society, intensifying and exacerbating all those sources of stress, strain, conflict, repression, dissatisfaction, hatred, destitution, and precarity in the everyday. Our world has long fed on the trauma of others and exploited cruelty across scales and species, concentrating wealth by making humans and non-humans resources to be exploited. Contemporary globalized capitalism's fundamental threat to life and livelihood for the planet generates a nervous energy, a sense of doom and frustration at a global scale. How can the constant bombardment of shock and emergency and suffering in our world be harnessed as a source of power and collective strength?

Yellow coal is the material residue of asymmetrical exchanges, those moments of exploitation and acrimonious survival that happen at every scale in our environment—those places where energy and matter are redistributed unequally, entities are harmed, bodies rub against each other, systems are agitated, and pain is metabolized into resentment and rage. The people in Krzhizhanovsky's tale decide as a global community to capitalize on their own alienation and disenfranchisement. This required a new thinking about how forces are exchanged in complex ecologies. This also involved designing and instigating negative interactions within their environment and manipulating the flows of people and things in a machinic system to generate as much negative energy as possible. Doorways were narrowed, crowds were kettled in tight spaces, and furniture were redesigned to produce discomfort. Surges of hatred, annoyance, and fear would drive pistons and gearwheels, everyone became both a battery and a charger, and reactions became intertwined with production.

No longer was stress and emotional trauma limited to the personal experience of the individual subject but were considered collective assets. The singular body, comprised of shifting relations and subject to affective forces, was treated as part of a decentralized assemblage of collective angst. By identifying emotions as a resource, the psychic experience of the populace is regarded as the shared responsibility of the community, therefore re-channelling the negative effects of the state to counter-intuitively support sustainability.

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[1]
Iza Tarasewicz, Yellow Coal, 2015
Site-specific installation using dry yellow ochre iron oxide pigment. Exhibition view, Iza Tarasewicz: Disturbances and Multiplicities at PGS Sopot. Photography: Tomasz Maryks
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One’s seemingly individual and personal emotional world is thus framed as not one’s own, but instead is regarded as a reflexive, intersubjective, and common resource generated through social and embodied encounters. Such a view is in line with the 19th century philosopher and sociologist Jean-Marie Guyau’s assertion that emotions and affects do not “belong” to any singular body, but rather emerge in the interaction of bodies within a social milieu. Guyau saw emotions as a “force of attraction” between and among living and non-living entities. This force is not located in the

environment nor in individuals but is co-produced through a reciprocal transmission in their contact. Curiously, Guyau believed that the most volatile type of interaction was not found in direct bodily contact, but instead emerged through the "consistent transmission of nervous vibrations and mental states."[4] It is these "sympathetic vibrations" that *Yellow Coal* seeks to harness, exploiting the ways that emotional states feedback and build in the interaction between internal and external worlds to form a shared, co-constitutive economic system. Similarly, the scholar Sara Ahmed has proposed the term "affective economies" to describe how emotions are effects of social and material circulations that bind individuals with communities, while separating others. Rather than seeing emotions as personal psychological dispositions, emotions "work, in concrete and particular ways, to mediate the relationship between the psychic and the social, and between the individual and the collective."[5] For Ahmed, the fact that emotions are not the property of any particular individual is what makes them binding and effective. Analysing the ways that emotions are used to construct psychic and political borders, she ventriloquizes racist and nationalist rhetoric: "Together we hate, and this hate is what makes us together."[6]

At one point in Krzhizhanovsky's story, the factory owners realize that the workers' hatred of their exploitation could itself be exploited for industrial purposes, and by laying the workers off, they could generate even more power from the waves of strikes and protests. This use of the workers' precarity as a resource in and of itself is reminiscent of Franco "Bifo" Berardi's astute observation that "Capitalism is based on the exploitation of physical energy, and semiocapitalism is grounded in the subjugation of the nervous energy of society."[7] By shifting to the production of immaterial and fragmented labour in a network, capitalism no longer needed workers, instead it just "needs cellular fractals of labour, underpaid, precarious, depersonalized."[8] This anxiety of the worker is not only an effect of the changing modes of production, but is indeed the very material in which capitalist production thrives upon, putting our psychic energies to work. Even our feeling of "burnout" and stress, our individual and collective "energy crisis", is fodder for exploitation. Just as social media capitalizes on the surplus anxious energy of society by translating dissociated social interactions into value, yellow coal meta-mines the unequal dynamics of a system in crisis and channels emotions as a form of power. In 1983, the sociologist Arlie Hochschild coined the term "emotional labour" to describe the ways that certain professions require the worker to evoke or suppress certain feelings, whether one must wear a smile, or act harsher than natural.[9] This alienation of the worker from their own feelings, and the gendered expectation of proper etiquette, has developed simultaneously with the progressive erasure of the spatial and temporal boundaries between work and life. Transformations in production have not only fundamentally changed the emotional and psychic register of our activities but have scripted and incorporated our social behaviours as a reserve of energy. Now that the totality of life has become a form of labour and we are always "on the job", our emotions and feelings have increasingly become the object of value production. Capitalism's power and reach is so extensive and intensive that it has infiltrated all aspects of existence, contaminating and degrading our networks of kinship, and reducing all relations to their meanest expression.

In Krzhizhanovsky's story, the bad vibes left over from abusive production processes and the trauma lingering in materials accrue as energetic detritus, a leftover force collecting in the background. Such a concept calls attention to the visible and invisible evidence of events within any environment and accentuates how objects get loaded by human and non-human interactions and disturbances. We've all come across spaces and objects that feel charged with trauma. Some vegetarians abstain from meat primarily because the negative energy from an accursed life and vicious death is seen to be left over in the animal's flesh. Yellow coal can be regarded as the crystallization of these intensities, materializing the abuse accumulated across the entire supply chain, from molecular, biological, and geological processes, to acts of extraction, exploitation, distillation, exchange, and disposal. By charting these micro and macro power dynamics, one can see complex multispecies entanglements and can start to reconsider how society organizes production.

This influence of turbulence and discord across scales is reminiscent of Alexander Chizhevsky's proposal that negatively charged ions are intertwined with mass human events.[10] The Russian cosmobiologist argued that solar phenomena were intimately tied to the activities of living organisms. Not only do geomagnetic storms resulting from sunspot-related solar flares effect electricity, mass insect infestations, and the functioning of local and global systems, but these forces also have profound impacts on the human neuropsychological apparatus. Chizhevsky suggested that human history runs parallel to the eleven-year cycles of sunspot activity, where periods of dormancy

and individualization alternate with moments of maximal activity and mass unification. Increased negative ionization in the atmosphere increases human excitability, therefore triggering humans en masse to act upon existing grievances and complaints through revolts, revolutions, and wars. Such forces can lead both to progressive uprisings and reactionary and irrational movements. Solar events produce monumental effects on an atomic level, charging electrons and vibrating all the bodies on earth, which combine and accumulate to catalyse a shared anxiety, a spirit of the masses. This theory suggests not only an intimate interchange at various magnitudes, but also gives counter-intuitive insights into how spontaneous uprisings emerge, spread, agglomerate, and develop into large-scale collective movements. Considering the staggering rapidity in which revolt spreads in periods of mass excitability, Chizhevsky agreed with the Roman historian Titus Livius that social conflicts are an “infectious plague.”

Over the last year, we have been especially reminded of the volatility of the masses in shared spaces. It is no coincidence that acts of anger and political rebellion have bubbled up during the Covid-19 pandemic. The rise of such an epidemiological crisis can be seen as the result of a corrupted agroeconomic system and was spread through the movement of people and goods across the world, contaminating sites where bodies come into contact, and amplifying the already precarious conditions of the populace. The unequal effects of the virus, from social distancing, border closures, and surveillance regimes, to mass death, illness, and unemployment, have intensified collective and individual grievances, while suppressing the social commons. The tedium and monotony of restricted movement, as well as the urgent political and biological threats to life, have generated a fiery tension. The real need to prevent contamination has been instrumentalized by governments as a means of quashing collective assembly. But conditions have gotten so out of hand that nothing can stop the multitude from expressing their rage. Across the world, mass protests and acts of civil disobedience are rising and becoming more radical, fuelled as much by specific political aims as by frustration with the feeling of hopelessness amidst threats to life itself. Whether they are shouting online, from their balconies, or coming together in public demonstrations, the multitudes are demanding their right to life, dignity, justice, and self-determination, as well as expressing anger with how states have used the shock of the virus to further deny their livelihoods. How do we act and be in common in a world that is constantly isolating and shocking us and destroying the very ecological and social systems in which we survive? Protest today is a collective response to an ever-increasing exposure to precarity, a channelling of anxiety into furious fulmination.

It is no coincidence that scholars across many disciplines regard emotions as a contagion that spreads across populations and exponentially grows. On a personal and collective level, emotions are treated as something that must be controlled, tamed, rationalized. It is important to recognize that “emotionality” is often a gendered and racialized description, where certain bodies and communities are silenced for being “too emotional”, too attached to their “irrational” passions. Sudden gatherings have always been treated as dangerous, contagious, unpredictable, and violent, which must be subdued or imprisoned. The unexpected and uncontrollable crowd, the mob, the riot, the rabble, is feared because it is passionate, subject to continual change, and constantly composing and recomposing itself and remaining in motion. At times, the nervous excitability of individual bodies synchronizes to produce a collective political subject that asserts its power through its presence in public space. The induced forms of economic, social, political, and ecological vulnerability are combatted by embracing instability as both an engine for coming together and a tool for disturbing the normative order of things. Acts of collective dissent are regularly condemned for their purportedly thoughtless character; they are seen to lack reason and are too incoherent and emotional in their demands. Often political movements have emphasized the need for unity and clarity, since only coherent, univocal demands are recognized as legitimate by dominant structures of power. Yet it is precisely this cacophonous plurality of the crowd, this murmur and roar that brings in differences and dissensus and threatens chaos, that gives the crowd its strength. Rather than speaking as a singular and controllable voice, a collective rumble from below shakes foundations. Where the states and their sympathizers seek to produce order through authoritative speech, the noisy crowd voices what Stefano Harney and Fred Moten refer to as “the call for and from disorder.”[11]

Always moving and mutating, collective dissent is powered through the confluence of emotions and the mutual positions of being at risk. Those who have been denied a voice speak out from their gut

in rage, responding to the abject vulgarity of a system that has harmed them by shouting uninhibited profanities and emancipatory epithets. Today more than ever, movements across the world are converting social and ecological vulnerability and their lived proximity to death, suffering, and mourning, as vehicles for their collectivity. Such acts of grievance-oriented resistance do not seek to fetishize suffering and historical or present violence. This anger instead is channelled as a form of "world making" in that it is an ongoing critique of the worlds we differentially inhabit and brings into existence a different conceptual circumstance, demanding the possibility for something new. The existential bile of emotional pain from the experience of subjugation and shock across scales, species, and systems, is redirected to stimulate solidarity. In a time of scarcities and susceptibilities, the surplus of nervous energy generated by a sick and destructive system is metabolized into pure power. The embodied energies built up from intersecting traumas resonate and interact to generate a heterogeneous revolutionary vibration. This murmur modulates masses of disparate bodies and creates a charged atmosphere of potentiality. Together, this force interrupts the order of things by introducing noise and multiplicity. For too long, this irate energy has been exploited to maintain the very systems that keep us in shock and subjugation. Can we reimagine and rechannel this shared emotional fury, like the society in *Yellow Coal*, to inaugurate new relations and ways of living and being together?

This text is part of a special issue in collaboration with The Lithuanian Cultural Institute, edited by Juste Jonutyte.

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- 5. Sara Ahmed, "Affective Economies," *Social Text 79*, Vol. 22, No. 2, summer 2004. 119.
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- 7. Franco "Bifo" Berardi, *Heroes: Mass Murder and Suicide*, London: Verso, 2015.
- 8. Franco "Bifo" Berardi, *After the Future*, edited Gary Genosko & Nicholas Thoburn, Oakland: AK Press, 2011.
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- 10. Alexander Chizhevsky, *The Earth in the Sun's Embrace*, 1931, in *Russian Cosmism*, edited Boris Groys, New York: E-Flux, 2018.
- 11. Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, T*he Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*, New York: Minor Compositions, 2013.

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