

FRANÇOIS LARUELLE, *THÉORIE GÉNÉRALE DES VICTIMES*.
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François Laruelle, the highly idiosyncratic French thinker and promulgator of “non-standard philosophy” has published a steady stream of books since the 1970s, but is currently experiencing a renaissance of sorts, particularly in the English-speaking world, where a first volley of three translated books recently appeared, and where no less than eight books are said to be currently in production at various publishing houses, not to mention a handful of adjacent anthologies and secondary sources. Having mapped out a way of thinking parallel to, and more or less incompatible with, philosophical thought, first articulated fully in *Principes de la non-philosophie* [*Principles of Non-Philosophy*] (1996), and most recently extended in *Philosophie non-standard* [*Non-Standard Philosophy*] (2010), Laruelle has directed his methodology at various topics and themes, from Marxism and photography, to mysticism, ethics, and psychoanalysis.

Laruelle’s newest book to appear in French, *Théorie générale des victimes* [*A General Theory of the Victim*] addresses the question of victims and victimhood, from slavery to the holocaust, from the persecution of Christ to modern genocides and crimes against humanity. In the book Laruelle elaborates a general theory of the victim, rooting it in a generic humanity, with the ultimate goal of freeing the victim from a received dogma that fetters victims with never-ending persecution. While admittedly dissimilar in both its method and outcomes, Laruelle’s book treads the same terrain encountered in Hegel’s famous discussion of the master-slave dialectic, or even Frantz Fanon’s treatment of alterity and violence in *The Wretched of the Earth*. The central question is crime and punishment, winners and losers, the powerful and the powerless, violence and victimization. Yet Laruelle refuses to approach the question from the perspective of tyranny, in an attempt to defang the powerful or somehow to use the master’s tools to bring down the master’s house. Likewise he refuses to admit that the dialectic itself exists. In other words, neither the powerful nor the power structure itself are determining for Laruelle. As with the biblical prophecy that the meek shall inherit the earth, Laruelle instead argues that the true ethical position for humanity is something like a generalized meek or, in the language of this book, a generalized victim. We are all, at the level of real lived experience, fragile victims in the most generic sense. Such a discovery is the only way that, according to Laruelle, humanity will be able to exit the vicious circle of

dialectical power relations (as with the master and slave locked in endless struggle) and enter into a condition of generic human ethics.

The heart of the text, occupying approximately one quarter its length, is the opening chapter on “The Victim-in-Person.” This is followed by a series of shorter chapters which expound on additional themes: the role of the intellectual, the “weak force” of the victim, crime and punishment, animals and animality, victims’ resurrection and insurrection, and ultimately Laruelle’s thoughts on some of the most significant historical instances of victimization such as the holocaust, Christ’s crucifixion, and crimes against humanity.

The central villain of the book is the intellectual. Laruelle particularly scorns those media-savvy liberal intellectuals who hawk their punditry from talk show to newspaper column. These are intellectuals in the Sartrean mold, “engaged” or “committed.” At times Laruelle also calls refers to them as “embedded” intellectuals, adopting the English word and leaving it untranslated in that way the French do when they want to firewall what they see as suspicious phenomena encroaching from overseas. Rather, then, than pursuing a course of engagement with crises, or trying to become embedded with the victim, Laruelle suggests a slight deviation into a parallel world. Instead of engaged intellectuals, Laruelle proposes *generic intellectuals*. “They are put under the condition of humanity,” he writes, “rather than put in service to the ‘values’ and ‘ends’ of philosophy” (84). Similar in spirit to Gramsci’s concept of the organic intellectual, or Benjamin’s call, in the “Author as Producer,” for the intellectual to merge directly with the mode of production, Laruelle’s generic intellectuals are put under the condition of humanity, meaning they fuse directly with mankind in the most general sense. This is a radical particularity; all persons can only be understood “in person.” There are no victims, only you and me and everyone else. Hence the most important coinage in the book: *the victim-in-person*. Television might show us victimized individuals and survivors, overexposing and circulating their images endlessly. But, if one should withdraw and cease to participate in such circuses, one will discover a non-representational victim, the “real” victim if you will. This is the victim-in-person. Where victims are individuated and tagged with certain classifications (via various biopolitical stigma, HIV status, citizenship status, etc.), the victim-in-person withdraws from such classification schemes, remaining generic, or whatever it happens to be.

The proper relation to the victim is thus never pity for Laruelle but compassion. He admits that his use of the word compassion might sound to some readers a bit old fashioned, if not patronizing, but the point is that, under a regime of compassion, all suffer together equally. Hence Laruelle’s is something of a “mystical maoism,” if such a thing is even possible: we are all generic victims determined by the insufficiency of the one. Thus while it might seem that those who are not victims are still patronizing the victim by showing compassion, or romanticizing the victim by seeking to emulate its glorious suffering, Laruelle insists that we are all always already victims, simply by virtue of being human. The problem is thus not so much victimization itself, but the decision to divide the world into victims and not. (This being, in Laruelle’s assessment, part and parcel of the philosophical gesture itself.)

While not present on every page by any means, there are two key sparring partners lurking deep in the book: Levinas for his work on ethics, and Badiou for his theory of the event. Laruelle is notoriously cagey about acknowledging influence; he typically fends off even the closest potential allies. (Intellectually speaking, Michel Henry is perhaps the closest, and while Gilles Deleuze is also close his very nearness presents a threat that must be subdued.) Laruelle considers Levinas an important philosopher of ethics, and cites him without prejudice. Yet in Laruelle’s view Levinas ultimately imports victimhood into philosophy and in so doing founders there. Badiou, on the other hand, earns little felicitation from Laruelle, seeming to haunt Laruelle’s recent writings more than other philosophers, to vivid effect of course in *Anti-Badiou* (2011), but also here. For Laruelle, Badiou represents all that is wrong with philosophy. Where Badiou argues for a volunteerist fidelity to the event, Laruelle sees the event as a generic resurrection of the One. Where Badiou thinks in terms of dialectics, Laruelle thinks in terms of “superposition”—a term which Laruelle unapologetically borrows from the world of quantum mechanics, to the chagrin of those who would view such a move as diletantish and pseudo-scientific.

So, in confronting him directly, Laruelle pokes fun at Badiou's powerful triad of body-language-truth, stated perhaps most clearly in the opening pages of *Logics of Worlds*: there are only bodies and languages, *except that there are truths*. Laruelle swaps in two different terms, lived experience and algebra for Badiou's opening pair (bodies and languages). That is to say, the real lived experience of bodies, which Laruelle prefers to call persons, or people as they are experienced "in person," and the language of formulae and variables in relation known as algebra. But then, true to form, Laruelle refuses to synthesize his two terms dialectically, as Badiou does. Instead he holds the two terms in "superposition." Thus for Laruelle, there are not Badiouian truths so much as "the algebraic objectivity of human lived experience" (53).

But it is not simply the dialectic that Laruelle finds distasteful in Badiou. The two thinkers also differ on the question of the event. We need "a theory of the event that leans toward quantum theory," Laruelle asserts, "by way of the generic" (153). By this he means that the event should be understood more as the withholding of decision rather than the consummation of it. Subjects are not so much individuals with wills who, through their own gumption, convert themselves, and in so doing further define themselves in relation to truth. On the contrary, the concept of "subject" is precisely the problem. The point is not to "increase the resolution" of the subject by adding more definitional predicates--I am militant, I am freedom fighter, I am subject to truth--but rather to de-individuate the subject, again using the metaphor of "superposition" or suspension of definition, toward a condition of generic being. What results are no longer individuals but *persons*, which taken together form not so much a mass or a nation but *humanity*.

Perhaps the best way to understand the difference between Badiou and Laruelle is to consider how the bible and Christianity figure in their work. Badiou has famously relied on Paul and the road to Damascus, the biblical story of revelation and conversion. The story of Paul's conversion fits Badiou's political theory because it represents a subject who experiences an event (the vision of Jesus) and whose life is decisively changed in allegiance to that event. The event, for Badiou, requires trenchant decisions made by subjects. Laruelle's theory of the event, on the other hand, could not be more different. Instead of rooting the event in a particular time, bound to a particular subject, Laruelle removes the event from temporal and spatial particularities making it both radically archaic and ultimately final (two temporal conditions that Laruelle enigmatically labels "before-the-first" and "in-the-last-instance"). Christ therefore, not Paul, takes center stage for Laruelle. For in the resurrection of Christ Laruelle sees a type of event that is not dialectical and not bound to the singular trenchant decisions of subjects. Thus resurrection not conversion is the driving force behind Laruelle's theory of the event. (Here Laruelle again appears a bit old fashioned even reactionary, compared to the I-can-change-the-world enthusiasm of the Badiouian militant, which Laruelle views as hopelessly narcissistic.) Conversion is too incorrigibly philosophical. And likewise that most emblematic philosophical event, to "know thyself," is too tainted by the logic of conversion. Both philosophy and religion rely too much on the lightning strike of revelation, Laruelle suggests. "A material formalism modeled after quantum theory, not a philosophical materialism, is the best way to think the event," he offers instead. "Christ and his resurrection are not so much a miraculous event as a non-standard or non-theological one" (154).

This comes to a climax in the book's provocative ending section, "Toward a Non-Standard Ethics / For Philosophers to Use." In a few brief pages Laruelle talks directly about specific instances of victimization, first with the holocaust, but also again by way of Christ's crucifixion, and ultimately with crimes against humanity. Yet this is one of two key areas left undeveloped in the book. Readers will be disappointed if they are expecting Laruelle to tackle human rights, genocide, the holocaust, or other matters of world-historical importance in any sustained way. This is not a book about political events and the waves of violence and trauma they produce. For better or worse he remains stubborn on the question of theory: Laruelle's non-standard philosophy can and must move forward using theory and theory alone. Analyses of events such as the Shoah or, for Christians, the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus are only useful to the extent that they can be re-jigged as theoretical constructs. So while this book perhaps veers closer to the newspaper headlines than past Laruelle projects, which are wildly obscure and aggressively theoretical, and is thus for that reason one of the more readable Laruelle volumes, it is still properly labeled a "general theory" of victims, not a tally sheet of the dead or a

manifesto for breaking the bonds of subjugation.

The second area that remains undeveloped is that of mass media and the public sphere. The book mentions the “media-savvy intellectual” but does not follow the thread very far. There is no talk at all about television, internet or other media, no real talk about how discourse operates in the public sphere, and no discussion or critique of contemporary public intellectuals such as, in today’s France, Bernard-Henri Lévy. So this is not exactly Laruelle’s treatise on the role of the intellectual. The theme is present, but relegated to the supporting cast.

Still the primary ethical task remains clear in Laruelle’s book: to view humanity as indivisible, without resorting to essence or nature. The only way to do this, he suggests, is to radicalize the generic condition of humanity, not to universalize the liberal subject, as with the “we are the world” conceits of Western privilege, but rather to do the opposite, to underdetermine persons rather than overdetermine them, to admit to a baseline insufficiency of personhood. Or as he says in a floating epigraph that launches the book, “why shouldn’t the victim be the cornerstone of humanity?”

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