

**authoritarian and minoritarian
thought. françois laruelle, a
*biography of ordinary man***

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It would not be entirely unfair to observe with respect to François Laruelle—whose (non-)philosophy has experienced, in the past decade, a rather dramatic upsurge in attention outside of France—that the order in which his books have gradually been translated into English has not done any great favours to his reception. Laruelle published his first monograph in 1971, and by the time that the first English-language translations of his major works began to appear (viz. 2010’s *Philosophies of Difference* [1986] and *Future Christ* [2002]), he had already published 22 such books, on top of sundry other articles and chapters, in French. Although the 2013 release of *Philosophy and Non-Philosophy* [1989] and *Principles of Non-Philosophy* [1996] arguably furnished Anglophone readers with the most central, programmatic works authored by Laruelle, this did little to address the overall deprivation of his oeuvre’s proper continuity, the haphazardness of translation—in spite of all good intentions—liable to give the impression that his books could effectively be read at random.

After all, Laruelle’s body of work evinces a patently linear progression and development of ideas: he is very much a systematic thinker, with said system expanded upon in each of his books, almost all of which presume knowledge of his previous works and the concepts that he has deployed within them. It is genuinely a *corpus*, a body of work that is progressively constructed, rather than a series of interrelated but largely independent texts (as is perhaps the predominant model within

continental philosophy). And it is for this reason that I would contend that the sequence of his English-language translation has been inimical to his reception: readers have been forced to dive right into the depths of his corpus, rather than being able to start in the shallows and gingerly wade in further. This has led to quite understandable confusions: for example, there is little indication supplied in the immensely difficult (albeit rewarding) *Philosophies of Difference* that the central concept of *the One*, which remains frustratingly indistinct in that particular text, was actually explicated quite clearly only one book prior: in *A Biography of Ordinary Man: On Authorities and Minorities* [1985].¹

Indeed, although *A Biography of Ordinary Man* is still quite an embryonic piece of writing, missing many of the characteristic elements of what he would later come to label “non-philosophy,” I would nonetheless regard it (contentiously, maybe) as the single most important text for grasping both the provenance and development of Laruelle’s broader project. For it is here that the fundamental problematic which traverses said project is first clearly elucidated, in an unusually straightforward and lucid manner: namely, the question of whether there is “*a proper and primitive essence of man, one that would not be an attribute of something else*” (8), striving to locate the real within a thought both of and from man *qua* individual.² Although Laruelle’s work is often presented, not wholly without justification, as a more radical or all-encompassing mutation of deconstruction, critiquing the self-legitimizing circularity of philosophical reason, this is only one, negative, aspect of a much larger positive project. As we are frequently reminded in this particular text, Laruelle has no interest in the negation or overcoming of philosophical reason, advocating instead “a strong but tolerant indifference to philosophy” (1), which is in turn founded upon the identification of a transcendental modality of thought—namely that of the “individual”, the “minority”, or, as he comes to refer to them in this book, the “ordinary man”—that is utterly incompatible with, and prior to, all such reason.

The overarching purpose of this book, which is presented as a sequence of theorems and explications, is to elaborate “the fundamental concepts of a rigorous—if not empirical, at least ‘scientific’—discipline of man, and, therefore, of minorities” (31), a discipline which is in no way philosophical, and which cannot be rendered convertible with the aporias of philosophical reason. Its premise is deceptively straightforward: man is not a façade or illusion, he is not a mere epiphenomenal product of difference, becoming, power relations, and so on; rather, man is absolutely real, he exists as such, but he exists in this fashion *outside* of the World, re-

lated to the latter only in a *uni-lateral* manner. This is the *minoritarian* experience of man. At the same time though, man is inevitably condemned to find himself within the World, to be forced into action, practice, and ultimately philosophy, all of which divides him from himself. This is, correspondingly, the *authoritarian* experience of man, whereby he is placed under the yoke of various universal attributes and predicates—e.g. language, power, history, etc.—that come to define his worldly destiny. In opposition to the latter, Laruelle hopes to bring to light a thought of man in himself, a thought that is too “ordinary” (i.e. non-philosophical) for these Authorities, and for philosophy. Such a thought forms the basis of what he claims to be a rigorous science of man, which no longer takes the latter as its object (it is not simply an extension of the human sciences), and does not “borrow its means of investigation, demonstration, and validation from existing sciences” (4), but instead proceeds directly *from* man, and is in fact identical *with* man in his essence.

This new science, and the minority experience more generally that Laruelle wishes to highlight, is “based in a thought of the One rather than a thought of Being” (8): it does not look “beyond” man, toward a purported essence, hiding behind him, that would be defined in terms of Being, or the Other, or Difference, or any other mode of transcendence; it does not announce the death of man, or the overcoming of man; it is not post-human, or anti-human, or trans-human, or even all too human; it instead looks to that which comes *before* all these philosophical and anthropological projections which objectify man, positing him as something other than himself. What this science seeks, in other words, is the immediate givenness of the One, a pre-philosophical immanent experience, without any possible transcendence, that does not follow from the One, but is *identical with* the One. This experience, Laruelle boldly proclaims, is the *veritas transcendentalis* that so many philosophers have vainly sought: an “unreflective immanence, without alienation or nothingness, and thus without a self-position: non-thetic or non-position (of) itself” (60) that is the basis of all truly minoritarian knowledge.

Western philosophy—what Laruelle frequently refers to as the “unitary” paradigm of thought—has only been able to ever recognize the One as “as a mere Unity, transcendental, to be sure, but in the mixed, logico-real, manner of a unity that is *added* to the empirical or ideal manifold” (55), a representation, rather than a lived reality. It can only conceive of unity as formed by division (e.g. Being and Nothingness, Identity and Difference, etc.), entirely failing to grasp the One *in its essence*. Part of the novelty of Laruelle’s project, then, is to not treat the real

as an object of thought, not even as an impossible or aporetic object, but as the identity of thought as such, proceeding from the real immanence of this inalienably finite experience of the One. This is a solitude of man, who is not enfolded within a totality or a unity, who is nothing other than finitude, irreducible to all external attributes or predicates. And it is the recognition of this radically finite, determinate reality of man, Laruelle argues, that allows us to “lay claim to a *transcendental naiveté*, real but precisely not philosophical, at the foundations of the absolute science of man” (12), a naiveté that does not ignore philosophy as such, but remains wholly indifferent to it, rendering all philosophies ultimately contingent. The biography of ordinary man, then, claims to be in effect a biography of us, of each individual: anterior to the philosophical universal of Man (and his various permutations and deconstructions), we find the ordinary man, the ordinary woman, the ordinary *individual* or *human*.³

A Biography of Ordinary Man follows quite directly, in both its ends and means, from Laruelle’s previous (as yet untranslated) book *The Minority Principle* [*Le principe de minorité*], published four years prior, which marks the inauguration of his self-described “Philosophy II” period, seeing Laruelle veer sharply away from the largely Nietzschean and Deleuzoguattarian equation of multiplicity with difference and minoritarian thought with libidinal productivity that characterized his early works, wherein he sought to identify a latent machinic strain of philosophical syntax that would remain resistant to all interpretive mastery. He instead turns toward a thought of multiplicity (or more precisely, *multiplicities*), that is utterly incompatible with the *continuous multiplicities* typical of the contemporary philosophies of difference, which he comes to view as mere distensions of the Western philosophical tradition, incapable of ever really altering its fundamental structure. In this preceding book, a rather curious and enigmatic text even by Laruelle’s own standards (whose writing style, although not as impenetrable as many would like to assert, is certainly idiosyncratic), he posits the titular *minority principle* as that which “compels us to seek out the possibility of multiplicities *beyond* Being, the Idea, the State, History, etc.”, identifying a concept of *unary multiplicities*, to which he grants the name *minorities*, that have been “forgotten” by philosophical discourse, and which can be thought prior to and independent of any and all universals, and thus in their very *essence*.⁴ His thesis, in short, is that “individuals are the ultimate constituents of reality, before Being, before the World, History, and the State.”⁵ It is in the figure of *the One* that we ultimately find the unreflective essence of such individuals.

The Minority Principle is, to a much greater extent than Laruelle's later works, grounded in familiar philosophical principles (viz. the transcendental methods of Kant and Husserl). Wishing to finally rescue the transcendental method from the empirico-transcendental doublet⁶ that always ends up tracing the outlines of transcendental from empirical content, Laruelle seeks "the unknown real = X, which gives an absolute (and no longer relative or ideal) character to the transcendental, and likewise the unknown transcendental = X which snatches the real from the play of being and Being, from the objectified real—each multiplying the power of the other beyond the powers of Being."⁷ It is precisely here that *A Biography of Ordinary Man* takes a different path, in two particular aspects: firstly, rather than departing from these philosophical materials toward a theory of the One or the minorities, it proceeds directly from the latter, making scant reference to either historical or contemporary philosophy (even whilst borrowing terminology from both), distancing itself from all norms of philosophical disputation, including any pretension to have surpassed or overcome preceding thinkers; secondly, in place of the prior book's intimidatingly abstract and schematic conceptualization of the minorities, Laruelle here gives these finite individuals a quite specific character—the real and the transcendental are no longer unknown, for they find their essence in the figure of the "ordinary man."

Following a lengthy introduction, wherein Laruelle outlines both the need for a rigorous science of man, and the notion of the "ordinary" man from whom such a science proceeds, the book is composed of four chapters, which simultaneously correspond to the three principal definitions of the ordinary man, and proceed in line with the irreversible order of immediate givens that is at the basis of this science: the first two chapters introduce us to the finite individual, the "minority", in their real *essence*, and the Authorities who seek to define such an individual using their own universal concepts and categories, therefore never actually speaking of the essence of man, but only interpreting it in their own terms; the third chapter discusses the mystical *existent*, by which the finite individual determines the World and the Authorities in the last instance; and the fourth chapter finally describes the pragmatic *existence*, whereby the finite individual acts upon the World and the Authorities not only mystically, but pragmatically, legitimating them as objects of the real science of man. It is in these latter two chapters that we find "the two means man has for escaping from unitary—philosophical and linguistic—enchantment" (185), furnishing a non-philosophical thought of ordinary man from and in his essence.

The first two chapters—entitled “Who are Minorities?” and “Who are Authorities?” respectively—establish the distinction between stato-minoritarian individuals, who are thought in terms of difference, and minorities in themselves, who cannot be reduced to any differential determination, and are thus real as such, thought before any and all universal attributes. A science of ordinary man, Laruelle suggests, is as much as anything a political task, for it is through such a science that we might learn “how not to inscribe minorities on the body of the State” (33), refusing to conceive of individuals in terms of those attributes projected upon them by the Authorities, and instead thinking them as real minorities who determine these Authorities in the last instance—a uni-lateral determination, absent of all reciprocal determination. “Ontology and politics, which serve us as thought,” he submits, “have never been able to conceive of individuals as anything other than modes of the State or of the great universals” (34). And yet, in the last instance it is not the State which defines individuals; rather, the State is defined by those finite individuals who are absolutely autonomous in relation to it. We are all minorities, individuals without individuality, singulars without singularity, multiples without multiplicity, unthinkable within the horizon of philosophical reason. The minoritarian experience is that of the ordinary man as an immediate given, as an unreflective transcendental experience of the One as immediately real in and from itself, without division or alterity.

In addition to this experience of the ordinary man as immediate given, in the radical finitude of his essence, however, “he also produces a second type of experience, that of universals: the World, History, Sexuality, Language, Power, Philosophy, etc.” (76), those Authorities which come after the One, and which represent a philosophical and political resistance to the One. This secondary experience of man is one in which he is thrown *into* the World, but at the same time one in which he also *unilateralizes* this relation between himself and the World, yielding “an absolute, irreversible contingency prior to any decision—philosophical or otherwise—that affects the insertion of minorities into Authorities, of individuals into the World” (80). Whereas the minorities find their essence in the real-as-One, a unity-without-scission, an immanence-without-transcendence, the essence of the Authorities lies instead in what Laruelle calls “effectivity”, a mixture of the One with its Other (viz. a particular part or mode of the World). Through the process of unilateralization, otherwise known as *determination in the last instance*, ordinary individuals are able to effectuate the science proper to them, breaking any presumed continuity or relation between the One and its object, manifesting an impermeable distinction between the proper essence of the Authorities (effectiv-

ity), and their transcendental or real essence (the immediate finite experience of the One), inasmuch as they are determined by the latter in the last instance.

Having thus defined the parameters of the minorities and Authorities, Laruelle then moves on in the latter two chapters—“Ordinary Mysticism” and “Ordinary Pragmatics”—to lay down the foundation for a *real critique* of the World, first in a theoretical, and then practical mode. Such a critique seeks neither to dissolve nor negate the World, but merely to shatter the latter’s ignorance of itself, its hallucination of its own reality *qua* totality. The mystical is, for Laruelle, not at all a movement of transcendence, and is located neither above, nor beyond everyday existence; rather, the mystical is simply the real as such, the ordinary individual, who *precedes* all worldly existence. Ordinary mysticism, then, is the critical component of the aforementioned absolute science, striving to put the World “back in its place” (137-138), positing it not as an illusion or deception, but as a positive, *contingent* reality that has no legitimate claim to the real as such. This mysticism is complemented by a practical critique consisting in a finite *use* of philosophy, starting from the finite acting subject, which extends “the concept of performativity beyond its linguistic and metaphysical limits” (181). This pragmatics is an extension of the mystical form of determination in the last instance, manifesting as a specifically and solely human mode of causality acting upon the World, really autonomous in relation to the various authoritarian rules and procedures by which philosophy produces meaning. At the same time, however, it takes the World, and the universals furnished by the Authorities, entirely seriously: “pragmatics is the generosity of the One or of ordinary mysticism recognizing the right of the World, recognizing in it a certain reality” (188), but a reality wholly distinct from that of the One, and the minorities.

This theme of the “ordinary” individual, who finds their real essence in an absolute finitude or radical immanence, and who is able to act upon the World without having to define themselves along philosophical lines is maintained throughout Laruelle’s oeuvre, right through to his most recent texts. Although it comes to accumulate greater complexity, what remains stable is the notion that there is an experience of the One, an experience of *ourselves*, that is not programmed in advance by philosophical or authoritarian (i.e. worldly) teleologies, that is never subject to transcendence or division, that is not in becoming or traversed by multiplicity, but simply *is*, not as an object of knowledge, but as an experience of itself, in its own immanence. An ordinary pragmatics is a practice that “remains as passive as the real itself” (192). It does not attempt to intervene in the World, but

simply maintains a steady indifference to it, safe in the knowledge and experience of its own inalienability.

Of course, a project so heavily centred upon an irreducible individuality, especially one that labels all social, political, and even worldly attributes as “authoritarian,” may be unpalatable to many readers. In an age of increasing social atomization, one might ask, what need do we have for “a biography of the solitary man” (8)? Likewise, one might quite reasonably balk at the use of the gendered term “man,” which is not only likely to seem painfully outdated to Anglophone readers, but would seem to project upon this figure certain historically and socially contingent attributes, contrary to Laruelle’s own claims.⁸ In this respect, it would seem crucial that we take seriously the priority which Laruelle purports to give to the “immediate actuality of use” over “all the linguistic or other projections in which unitary thinkers, that is, intellectuals, engage” (177): the term “man,” as used in this context, is certainly inadequate as a description of the real identity that underpins all experience, whether worldly or otherwise, but so is any other term—minority, individual, the One, etc.

Ultimately, it would seem, whatever name we bestow upon this identity is of no real import, for such descriptions have no effect upon its unreflective essence. It is philosophy that identifies the human individual with such generalities—“a knowledge, an activity, a race, a desire, an existence, a writing, a society, a language, a sex” (5)—and in doing so effaces their essence, dividing them from themselves. The specific term “man” is a signifier drawn from philosophical materials, but it is here mutated, rendered inert or sterile, stripped of all propositional content, such that it does not in any way describe this individual, who is after all “without a face and without qualities” (10), but merely acts as the support for a minoritarian thought that proceeds irreversibly from them. There is no archetype or example, whether empirical or ideal, of what an ordinary “man” is, for “he” is nothing other than a lived experience, a finite and intrinsic immanence.

Likewise, the term “authoritarian,” in spite of its negative overtones, must surely be understood not as a value judgement (which would reinscribe it within a philosophical hierarchy), but as a neutral descriptor of the way in which the Authorities, and the World in which they operate, function through a pretension to universality that robs individuals of their finitude, situating them within a totality (they are “totalitarian,” in a very literal sense), denying them their status as minorities, rendering them in some way equivalent (even if this is an equivalence

grounded in difference). “When minorities meet historical, cultural, and political criteria,” Laruelle writes, “they are thereby responsible and disputable groups, countable and speakable in institutional spaces and according to supposedly given codes—groups that are more or less identifiable and that agree, whether they like it or not, to enter into the authoritarian parousia of the World” (70). The minorities are, in their essence, invisible to the domain of politics, philosophy, and any other unitary mode of thought. In fact, Laruelle brazenly suggests, a rigorous science of these minorities, and thus of ordinary man, might actually become a “means of eradicating the resentment and hatred of the World innate to unitary or philosophical critique” (142-143), attesting to the real and absolute autonomy of the One in relation to the World of which it is the essence.

Laruelle’s goal is not to diminish, resist, or revolt against the World, society, culture, or whatever else in the name of the solitary man, but to display a positive indifference, rendering these formations (and their numerous predications) contingent in relation to the only truly unalienated and inalienable knowledge. Such knowledge, which is an irreducibly *human* knowledge, is not something that we can find either outside of ourselves or even within ourselves; it is, rather, that which we find *before* ourselves—that is, before our worldly existence—not in a temporal, or even logical, but purely transcendental sense. The minorities “form the in-audible background noise of culture and history, a noise completely in the background, uncreated and thus inexhaustible” (67), the noise that philosophy has forgotten, and will always forget, but which nevertheless remains its real essence in the last instance. Laruelle’s work does not strive to be “useful,” at least in the sense that we have come to expect from philosophers. He does not spruik concepts that might be “applied” to empirical objects, seeking to explain, judge, or even negate the latter. He does not entreat another philosophical intervention into the World, which would end up just another “an instrument of vengeance” wielded against the latter (142). It is, rather, the decidedly naive experience of one’s own minority, one’s own unbreakable finitude, one’s real and absolute autonomy, in the face of any and all authoritarian and totalitarian gestures—a real reversal of the oft-derided Copernican Revolution, presuming “that the finite subject is located at the center (of) itself, and no longer of the World, and that the World ceases to revolve around the subject so that it can be determined in the last instance by it” (74)—which constitutes the implacable premise of Laruelle’s non-philosophical project.

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NOTES

1. The introduction to this book was previously published under the name “A Rigorous Science of Man,” in *From Decision to Heresy: Experiments in Non-Standard Thought*. Ed. and trans. Robin Mackay. Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2012, pp. 33-73.
2. This and all subsequent parenthetical references are taken from François Laruelle, *A Biography of Man: On Authorities and Minorities*. Trans. Jessie Hock and Alex Dubilet. Cambridge and Medford, MA: Polity, 2018.
3. The relationship between Laruelle’s project and humanism is complex, considering the primacy he gives to the figure of man. A decade later, he would argue that humanism comprises a “set of philosophical images of man, rather than the rigorous knowledge of the latter [...] a form of speculative imagery, the product of an imagination, probably transcendental, understood in a very general sense as an operation of synthesis of contraries,” which he counterposes against his own postulation of “a transcendental science as simple, uni-lateral, or non-specular reflection (of) the real.” More specifically, he suggests that “these new perspectives on man constitute, rather than an anti-humanism, a sort of ‘non-humanism,’ a science of man that is more universal than any philosophy” (*Théorie des Étrangers: Science des hommes, démocratie, non-psychanalyse*. Paris: Éditions Kimé, 1995, pp. 105, 110, my translation).
4. François Laruelle, *Le principe de minorité*. Paris: Aubier Montaigne, 1981, 6, my translation.
5. Ibid.
6. See Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. Trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith. London and New York: Routledge, 1970.
7. Laruelle, *Le principe de minorité*, 13.
8. Laruelle would later argue, as part of his proposal for a *non-psychoanalysis*, that a “unified theory of woman and man,” i.e. a non-unitary theory, “is possible on the condition that it is capable of declaring the theoretical and pragmatic invalidation of sexual difference, and its usage as a simple material in a science of humans” (*Théorie des Étrangers*, 317). Cf. François Laruelle and Anne-Françoise Schmid, “Sexed Identity.” *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 19:2 (2014): 35-39.