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Victims without Philosophy: Intellectuals and Power; General Theory of Victims

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Review Essay

Victims without Philosophy

Intellectuals and Power

François Laruelle. Trans. Anthony Paul Smith. Cambridge and Malden, MA: Polity, 2015. 160pp.

General Theory of Victims

François Laruelle. Trans. Jessie Hock and Alex Dubilet. Cambridge and Malden, MA: Polity, 2015. 184pp.

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There does not exist an easy way to discuss François Laruelle and it is impossible to be ecstatic about his writing. The two books under scrutiny here—*Intellectuals and Power* and *General Theory of* Victims—are, however, a relatively accessible introduction to the machinic parlance that Laruelle superposes onto philosophy's presumed legibility. The human instance he discusses in both works is that of the victim. These two books could be both beneficial for and alienating to the wider readership in humanities: not for lack of originality (or even clarity), but due to the signature-style of conceptual resistance in Laruelle's language. Virtually every-one—from gender studies to nationalism studies scholars—willing to submit herself to the conceptual skirmish dramatized in these two books has a lot to gain in order to renew her approach to the agency of the victim, the criminal, the survivor. The cunning proviso of the gain—to say this without diplomacy—

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is to take the unruly voyage of Laruelle through the syntactical mutilations of thought and language. Only then can one enthusiastically "recommend" these writings.

This review has the aim to provide a synoptic reading of two recent translations of Laruelle in the context of the expanding Anglo-Saxon reception of his work: *Intellectuals and Power* and *General Theory of Victims* (hereafter respectively abbreviated to IP and GTV). I have chosen to discuss them together for reasons that are, I assume, identical to the publisher's idea for their simultaneous publication: namely, a renewed theorizing of what is a victim, and the idea to divorce the victim from the intellectual. Nothing less is implied in Laruelle's statement that "the Victim is one of the greatest philosophical inventions of the XXth century" (GTV, 15). In the global age of drone-warfare, nano-horror and Phoenix-like terror, this sounds as a justifiable project.

While IP (published in French in 2003) introduces the very rupture between victim and intellectual, GTV (originally published in 2012) develops a sort of "victimology" that defends and always-already starts with the lived experiences of the victim. The two books are situated differently in terms of Laruelle's own chronology, according to his own self-systematization of Philosophy I-V. IP belongs to Philosophy IV, while GTV fits in Philosophy V. GTV is a work stepping into the period of so-called non-standard philosophy, a term Laruelle introduced in 2010 to partially rectify his own self-periodization. There is some relevance in discussing this conceptual move from non-philosophy to non-standard philosophy, which I am not going to do here, but suffice it to say that GTV, while developing problems already rehearsed in IP, is a succinct exercise in the ethics and politics of the victim already experimented with in IP. This is felt the most in GTV's language ("oraxiom," "uni-version," etc).

This matter of periodization reveals some inherent progression in Laruelle's thought with regards to the autonomization and radicalization of non-philosophy. GTV hardly responds, and is not a juxtaposition to, an originary philosophical primate that one can find in "philosophy." Yet in IP we can find a reaction to some philosophical semblance, an internal non-philosophical struggle with philosophy's lugubrious residues within non-philosophy. This is the result of non-philosophy's work *with* philosophy. Yet in Philosophy V, and already beginning with Philosophy III, Laruelle reaches the mature phase of *emancipating* non-philosophy from philosophy through and through. Thus, it is important to notice that as with other books of Laruelle, similar ideas take on different shape in different periods. A.P. Smith's introduction (IP, ix) gives the full details to this

story. The non-philosophy of victims is one such significant example, revealing an admirable concoction of sustainable coherence and ethical outrage that spans throughout Laruelle's oeuvre. At any rate, both works are consequent upon the "mature phase" of non-philosophy, Philosophy III, with its realization of a transcendental approach to philosophy and then treating it as "materials" for non-philosophy.

In is in this way that IP represents an effort to wrench the victim away from philosophy, and GTV is the "mature phase" of a sort of "victimocracy" in much the same way that Philosophy III corresponds to I and II. In virtually all of Laruelle's writings and issues he struggles with, we can find a scalable approach leading from immersion into philosophy to the critique of transcendentalism and decisionism of philosophy to impoverishment/radicalization of philosophical concepts, a process that eventually hijacks them in the service of non-philosophy. The function of service/serving is central here: the two works converge in abducting the notion of the victim not merely from philosophy but also from a conceptual thinking of the *figurality* of intellectuals. (The ambit is quite ambitious: from Sartre through Foucault to Lévy and Badiou). These can be anti-philosophical while still retaining the primacy of discourse over the Real (of the victim). Accordingly, the two books serve not *the* or *any* idea of the victim: they serve (to) the victim without theory, in the sense that the victim-in-person takes precedence over the represented, or "determined," victim.

IP is the product of a dialogue with the philosophical journalism of Philippe Petit and was originally published in the series he edits, *Conversations for Tomorrow*. This is especially challenging for Laruelle as he is forced to explain himself in light of other philosophies, which contributes to the largely apophatic quality of the dialogue and Petit's systematic convulsions in trying to extract Laruelle's luddite lucidity at his best. In IP the victim as an issue takes central stage, but it is still choreographed around tenets of rejections. Thus the victim is the "unthought" of philosophy (IP, xi); Laruelle rejects to be a philosopher of the Victim (IP, 84), because for philosophy the Victim is a secondary object (GTV, 2) and "[a]ll philosophers are renegades of victims or of humans" (GTV, 52); simply, for philosophy the victim is a "waste of thought" (GTV, 101). Philosophy acts ad both judge and plaintiff (Petit, IP, xix), it protects itself from human suffering (IP, 68). We honestly "do not know what a victim is" (GTV, xii). For non-philosophy the victim is not a hero (IP, 12), while philosophy itself is "the correlation of victims and heroes" (GTV, 67)—which is why the philosopher/the intellectual become a "hero of

thought" (GTV, 70; see also 90). Laruelle's purpose here is to further realize his idea of bringing peace and democracy in thought. The way to do so is the radical immanence of Man which brings peace (IP, 23)—and, finally, "the victim is peace-in-person" (IP, 149). Importantly, here the hyphenated status of personhood indexes the link between in-person and the One (GTV, xv). The victim is for the philosopher linked to Being, and Laruelle refuses to be a "junkie of Being" (IP, 9; Petit, IP, 132). These apophatic procedures are performed in IP: the gain is that man-in-person is "no longer identical to the victim" (GTV, 37).

Laruelle does not give up the term victim. In GTV the victim is for the first time cataphatically denuded in all of her reality. This is why it is important to read the two works together, as they reveal Laruelle's own struggles with emancipating both the victim and himself from what he calls the "dominant intellectual" in IP (54–55) and the "media intellectual" in GTV (51 ff.). Laruelle delinks himself from the philosophical history of victimhood by devising his own non-philosophical anti-anthropology. There are three recognizable steps here: first, non-philosophy is a practice determined by the Name-of-Man (IP, 24); second, the notion of the Name-of-Man already holds in itself the immanence of the One-Real, and is as such the human, not a representationalist anthropology (IP, 31); and third, the non-philosopher comes to think in terms of the victim as Man, and not as subject (IP, 47). This becomes more understandable when later he speaks of the Man-in-Person and theological histories: only the subject can be buried under either sky or earth—Man-in-Person cannot (GTV, 87). Hence the use of Victim-in-Person: a mediate-without-mediation (GTV, xxi), he is "a formal symbol for the most concrete human subject" (GTV, 24), leading to a renewed theory of the victim that retains "Man," but gives up his attributes (GTV, 19). Laruelle also distinguishes between two types of victims: repeated or survivor victim and the arisen victim as a glorious body (GTV, 43). The mere role of the intellectual is "to only help the victim arise in-Man" (GTV, 112). Anything else would amount to the fetishization of the survivor, a true "philosophical disaster."

Laruelle juxtaposes two models of the intellectual: the dominant vs the determined (in IP) corresponding to the media and the generic ones (in GTV). The dominant intellectual is a regional version of the "philosopher" (IP, 54–55 ff.). The philosopher's material is the subject. Man becomes a victim in the philosophical sense only as the subject (IP, 64) who is modeled after philosophical decision. To the

philosopher's victim Laruelle opposes the victim-in-person who is himself a point of indecision. The dominant intellectual is but a "super victimizing machine" (GTV, 139). The determined intellectual is determined directly by the victim: both he and his cause are "non-engaged" (IP, 10); he is motivated, but not determined by history (IP, 81). A determined intellectual is non-humanitarian in the sense that he "works under the Name-of-Man" (IP, 113). He is not a person of action, but practice (IP, 124; 129), which is beneficial for the victim as practice does not contain its own conditions of possibility. In the discussion of these model we can best track Laruelle's travelling between apo- and cataphatic victimocracy. In GTV the juxtaposition media vs generic intellectual finds its resolution in the lived experience of what is "non-standard" proper. The media (dominant) intellectual is merely invested in the media, while the victim is always already mediate-without-mediation. The media is the perfect example of the philosophical defense of the victim which works via overdetermination and overrepresentation: the defense then becomes "means to justify [the intellectual's] narcissism" (GTV, 54). The generic (determined) intellectual makes use of philosophy but only as "underdetermined" means, and while the first inspects victims, the latter imitates the clones of the victims (GTV, 51, 118, also 121; the latter imitates the "clone" as the victim is an impersonal instance that can only die once at a time as a subject, but never as a "person").

The simple way of explaining Laruelle's victim is to see it through his theory of the Real-One. Just as in his major works the general project of non-philosophy is to speak from, and not of and about the One, so here the regional knowledge offered is to speak from the victim. This is the glue of those two books. Accordingly, Man-in-Person is foreclosed to truth (IP, 124) in a way similar to the way the unilateral Real is foreclosed to us. The divorce with intellectualism can happen only if "the victim must be foreclosed to intellectual Reason" (GTV, 62). Thus while IP develops as a negative victimology, GTV is the positive one of an ethics that concerns the victim as much as the thinker. What unites these two works is how the kind of thinker that Laruelle struggles to be debunks the myth of the given for the philosopher: the uninterpretable and violent silence of philosophical interpretation the victim is responsibilized with.

These two short, but incisive works by Laruelle are non-standard tools and materials. If the global reception of Laruelle follows its steady development, his understanding of the victim will have much to offer to unexpected vistas in his own reception. Laruelle himself painlessly clarifies the matter: "if there is to be an

institutionalization for non-philosophy it will be slow and will not happen without causing damage either" (IP, 120). Non-philosophy's reception has already been slow and at this historical juncture we are at the stage of "damage-doing." And here is a summary of the damages: GTV's damage can easily fit in the agendas of radical criminology (see 64, 127, 135, 153, all concerning the "criminal" and his relation to the victim), as well as history of medicine and history of sexuality. IP's damage is mainly done to fields such as intellectual history and theory of elites, as well as education studies. Both books and their (hopefully) interfaced reception have the potential to buttress the study of power relations in contemporary social movements and global inequalities: they provide an incendiary and axiomatic model of the victim as the wound of the real.

The reintroduction of the victim in humanities more broadly has a lot to offer and there will be much to be lost by proponents of philosophical decisionism (which is, after all, axiomatically naturalized and rejected at the same time by its practitioners). The problem with receiving Laruelle's vision of the victim is not so much in that it imitates a process of giving agency to the victim; the problem is that the victim is that agency itself and is, as such, an impersonal axiomatic positionality. In this sense, as with other ideas and works by Laruelle, it would be difficult to expect a fastidious reception of his non-standard victim for the simple reason that the model of theorist-as-an-a-priori-intellectual *has everything to lose* in the debate between himself and his audience. (There is nothing undetermined in Laruelle's discussion of the victim's "double death.") That in the process the victim is lost - this is the philosophical scandal Laruelle attempts to shatter once and for all. The victim as per his understanding asks the intellectual to dismantle himself and burn the history of a reciprocal discourse that crucifies the victim between the philosopher's decision and society's scopic libido: a double philosophical parasite that feeds on the victim in its decisionist subjugated version.

The infrastructural complication produced by Laruelle is that up to a point what he proposes is emancipating and vacating the axiomatic posture of thought *on* the victim. One can object that Laruelle betrays his own project of emancipating the victim by bombarding the topology of the thought of the victim instead of giving the victim the arsenal. Yet this egg-and-chicken dialectics is not a debate that can be ever closed. It can be closed only in a very qualified sense, where the vacated topology of the victim coincides with the lived experience of the real victim-in-person. But the coincidence won not ever happen without the non-philosophical mutilation of that decisional topology.

Laruelle's victimocracy knows that, and hopes to reduce the unnecessary pangs of the victim by inducing a much necessary stroke at the heart of philosophy. Nothing less would constitute a damage.

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