

General Theory of Victims

FRANÇOIS LARUELLE, Translated by Jessie Hock and Alex Dubilet

Malden, MA: Polity Press, 184 pp. \$19.95 (paper)

doi:10.1017/S0012217316000421

Who speaks for the victims if the victims can't speak for themselves? This is the central question of the theory of the subaltern subject after Edward Said and Gayatri Spivak.¹ But in François Laruelle's *General Theory of Victims*, this question is scarcely asked, since Laruelle is so concerned with describing the master/slave relationship, in French intellectual culture, between what he calls "embedded" or "media" intellectuals (think: Bernard-Henri Lévy) (50-63) and the victims they purport to represent ("the victim[s]-in-person," 12-29)—that is, the relationship between "the intellectual and 'his' victim" (1-11)—that the victims hardly speak. This is unfortunate, because the frustrating problem with French intellectual discourse is precisely this tendency to speak *to* or *through* the subjects it purports to represent. And although Laruelle is concerned to counteract this tendency, it is questionable whether he, too, does not contribute to the silencing of the victims whom he presumes to speak for and represent.

Western philosophy, Laruelle suggests, has been characterized, since always, by its solicitude for the victims. The Greek philosophers' fascination with Socrates, the Christian theologians' fascination with Jesus Christ, and, especially, the Jewish philosophers' fixation upon Holocaust victims, are simply superficial manifestations, Laruelle argues, of a deeper complicity between the Western metaphysical structure of master and slave, and the self-perpetuating cycle of victimization. Western philosophy has aided and abetted that self-perpetuating cycle, which Laruelle claims a general theory of victims can help to subvert or overturn, as part of the broader attack on Western philosophy carried out by what he calls 'non-standard philosophy' or 'non-philosophy.' "Victims," Laruelle argues, "ought to be ethically assisted by 'non-philosophical' rather than [by] ontological thought. This assistance is the function of the intellectual" (6-7). But can Laruelle's critique of the complicity of French intellectuals in the self-perpetuating cycle of victimization really claim to subvert or overturn the sovereign master/slave relationship of Western philosophy with its victims? Or does Laruelle's general theory of victims simply end up buttressing the self-proclaimed victors, the unchallenged sovereigns, the secret criminals, in their continuing reign of terror over their silent and passive victims?

"We do not know," Laruelle begins, "what a victim is. We know nothing of it but symptoms, and we must ... produce its concept with ... a philosophy we will call 'non-standard'" (xiii). It might be expected, then, that Laruelle's general theory of victims would be concerned, not just with 'the victim-in-general' (the 'generic' victim), but also with the specific victims of the contemporary world-system: Syrian refugees,

¹ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York, Vintage Books, 1979). Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Cultures*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988): 271-313.

Afghani rape victims, US drone strike casualties, Guantanamo detainees, and so on. But Laruelle's preoccupation with the sovereign relationship between the French intellectual and 'his' victims precludes any concern with the flesh-and-blood victims themselves, who remain spectral 'non-persons' in his 'non-philosophical' discourse. "*Victim-in-person*," Laruelle writes, "*is the victim [only?] insofar as it determines in-the-last-instance the representation and transformation of the defense work done by [Western?] intellectuals*" (8). And: "Our goal," as Western intellectuals, is "to relocate the victim from the plane of being an intellectual and media object to the status of an object of knowledge" (3). But as an object of knowledge, isn't the victim still just that?—a silent, passive object, represented and spoken through by the Western intellectual?—who, in Laruelle's terms, doesn't just impersonate or imitate, but actually 'superposes' himself, and even 'clones' himself (!), upon the victim, and therefore makes 'it' (Laruelle's pronoun) simply a subconscious projection of himself. "[T]he cloning of victims in the form of intellectuals" (29), Laruelle argues, is 'the defense work' of 'non-philosophy,' which allows the "future-oriented intellectual" to "superpose[] himself on the victim in a practical way" (119), to raise the victim, who "feels itself as a victim," but "does not understand itself" (8), from silence and passivity to speech and action, and thereby to bring about its "insurrection and resurrection" (106-116). "The victim," Laruelle writes, "is defined by a radical passivity" (8), and by a radical poverty of speech; and so the Western philosopher simply *must* super(im)pose himself upon 'it,' so that the subaltern might, finally, speak, the survivors live again, and the victims rise from their unquiet graves to resurrected life. But whether the victim is brought to speech and empowered to speak for 'it'-self, or whether the French intellectual simply speaks through 'his' victims, is a question that raises doubts about Laruelle's general theory of victims.

Strangely, there is also a distinctly theological element to Laruelle's argument, which clashes with his attempts to apply scientific concepts (quantum superposition, cloning, etc.) to the victimological field. In a recent interview in *Actu Philosophia* (March 6, 2015), Laruelle proclaimed that "we are all Christs" in the gloriously transcendent realm of 'non-philosophy.' But in *General Theory of Victims*, Laruelle instead argues, somewhat confusingly, that "(1) victims are the ordinary messiahs of intellectuals; they serve them as a transcendental guide; [while] (2) they are also ... the only messiahs that intellectuals imitate or of which they are the clones; [and] (3) lastly [the victims] are ... helped to arise by generic intellectuals" (134), who then must be the Christ-figures who bring about the resurrection of the silent, passive subject/object into the "arisen body" of "the Glorious Victim" (133). But this schizophrenic doubling of sovereign and subject, master and slave, victor and victim, in Laruelle's crypto-messianic discourse, can't really disguise the sleight-of-hand trick by which the French intellectual, who purports to speak for and represent the suffering, passive victims, instead is transfigured into the semi-divine saviour or superhuman messiah to those terribly impoverished, corpse-like victims, who are finally reduced to the resurrected living dead, the un-dead Lazaruses of Laruelle's rather bizarre 'Christo-fiction.'

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