

NON-PHILOSOPHY, SOCIAL ACTION, AND PERFORMANCE

CONSTANCE L. MUI (New Orleans)
JULIEN S. MURPHY (Portland, Maine)

Victims, Power and Intellectuals: Laruelle and Sartre

Abstract

*In two recent works, *Intellectuals and Power* and *General Theory of Victims*, François Laruelle offers a critique of the public intellectual, including Jean-Paul Sartre, claiming such intellectuals have a disregard for victims of crimes against humanity. Laruelle insists that the victim has been left out of philosophy and displaced by an abstract pursuit of justice. He offers a non-philosophical approach that reverses the victim/intellectual dyad and calls for compassionate insurrection. In this paper, we probe Laruelle's critique of the committed intellectual's obligations to victims, specifically, through an examination of Sartre's "A Plea for Intellectuals." We hope to show the value of Laruelle's theory on victims, crime and power for imagining future-oriented intellectuals.*

Keywords: Laruelle, Sartre, power, intellectuals, victim, non-philosophy, compassion

In *Intellectuals and Power*, an interview with Philippe Petit that was translated into English shortly after the Boston Marathon bombing in 2013, François Laruelle offers a critique of public intellectuals. He faults French intellectuals such as Jean-Paul Sartre for their disregard for victims of crimes against humanity, and their willingness in some instances to legitimate atrocities. Laruelle is equally dissatisfied with philosophy itself, contending that in its pursuit of abstract justice, philosophy has all but forgotten the actual victims of injustice. As a result, philosophy has failed to recognize an exclusive human identity for victims. Laruelle insists that victims are central to humanity, and we must rethink our obligations toward them by revising our notion of the intellectual who speaks in their behalf. With this in mind, he offers a post-continental approach to understanding the

relationship between intellectuals and victims in his recent book, *General Theory of Victims*. Our purpose is to assess the value of Laruelle's critique of intellectuals in the two works through a Laruellean reading of Sartre's later view of engaged intellectuals in "A Plea for Intellectuals." (Sartre 1976) Our analysis seeks to show the value of Laruelle's work for charting a path forward for intellectuals in the current century.

Recent massacres in the U.S. jettison a focus on victims in public discourse. Mass casualties by gun violence in America are etched in the public consciousness and referenced by location: Sutherland Springs, Texas (2017); Las Vegas (2017); Dallas (2016); Orlando (2016); San Bernardino (2015); Charleston (2015); Sandy Hook (2012); Aurora (2012); and Tucson (2011). Sadly, this is by no means an exhaustive list, as attacks on innocent bystanders by fellow citizens are becoming increasingly common.¹ Assailants who often act alone use assault weapons to maximize casualties at a scale that is unfathomable. Despite the odds, just about anyone can imagine being the next victim. In fact, concurrent with this writing is the Las Vegas shootings, in which a gunman fired 280 rounds into an outdoor music concert crowd of thousands on the Vegas Strip, killing 58 people and injuring 546 others, all within ten minutes. (Belson, 2017) Elsewhere in the war-torn part of the Sinai Peninsula, there are 305 dead from a single attack on a Sufi mosque. (Walsh and Youssef, 2017) What we mark here is the new reality of civil society, where massacres of war zones have been transported through lone assailants to our churches, schools, and public arenas in America.

Victims of gun violence in a heavily-armed technological society typically receive considerable media attention, even though none has resulted in appreciable political change. What have remained largely invisible to the public eye are victims of a different kind of violence, namely, economic deprivation. We rarely pay attention to the homeless death rate, even though in the past year alone, there were 210 homeless people who died on the streets in Los Angeles, (Luppi, 2017) 117 in Utah, (Anderson, 2017) 118 in Nashville, (Koehn, 2017) and 37 in the small city of Portland, Maine. (Hoey, 2017) The body count from other cities across the country is buried deeply in media coverage, if covered at all. Likewise, there are no official statistics on impoverished victims who die from lack of medical attention, from malnutrition, or from fires related to substandard housing.

¹ These episodes of mass shootings are not exclusively an American phenomenon. To cite one example, in 2012 a lone shooter in Norway also deployed a small bomb to kill more than seventy young people at a summer camp.

Victims of all stripes and the increasing role of public intellectuals who would speak in their defense are important issues worthy of philosophical examination. Laruelle rejects the treatment of victims as negligible collateral damage, posing the question in the preface of *General Theory of Victims*, "If the executioner is the cornerstone of society (Joseph de Maistre), why would the victim not be the cornerstone of humanity?" (2015b, ii) In view of the rising incidents of victims of violence, and of the fact that it has been over fifty years since Sartre theorized about the engaged intellectual, it is time to rethink the relationship between victims and intellectuals. Laruelle offers a new approach for framing that relationship, one that focuses on a theory of victims that places the victim in a generic, undetermined humanity, and the important role of intellectuals in making a case for their humanity. What sort of intellectual is needed now?

It is important to note that both *Intellectuals and Power* and *General Theory of Victims* are written as works of "non-philosophy". They challenge the idea of the public intellectual by calling out philosophy's authority. Laruelle, who does not regard himself as an intellectual in the traditional sense, goes beyond the trajectory of Sartre, Foucault, and Deleuze to develop a new conception of victims and, in that connection, a new understanding of the intellectual/victim relationship. The subtitle of *Intellectuals and Power*, "*The Insurrection of the Victim*" signals this move. It is the victim, he claims, that exposes the limits of power that undergirds the very position of the public intellectual. Through a non-philosophical analysis, Laruelle presents a new victim/intellectual dyad that forms the crux of his general theory. In this analysis Laruelle also offers a sketch of the intellectual for the future.

We begin with a description of Laruelle's non-philosophy to show the theoretical difference in the zone of operation between philosophy and non-philosophy. We then draw comparisons between Laruelle's and Sartre's accounts of the proper roles of intellectuals. This is followed by an examination of Laruelle's theory of victims, which is based what such concepts as 'Victim-in-person' and 'Human-in-person.' We trace how Laruelle applies this theory to reframe the victim/intellectual dyad. We conclude with an assessment of the degree to which Sartre's committed intellectual aligns with Laruelle's generic intellectual, as well as some observations concerning the future of the post-Sartrean intellectual for post-continental (non) philosophy.

Laruelle's Non-Philosophy

Any assessment of Laruelle's critique of intellectuals must be understood within his non-philosophy, a term he uses to refer to a rethinking of philosophy. It could easily be assumed that non-philosophy, like Sartre's works of fiction, has nothing to do with theory or reason or the logical representation of thought. This would be mistaken, as Laruelle's non-philosophy is a theory-wielding discourse that looks quite a bit like philosophy. As such, non-philosophy is not a refutation of philosophy or a meta-philosophy, but an inquiry that requires the use of philosophy, much like non-Euclidean geometry can only be understood by its relationship to Euclidean geometry. It is not anti-philosophical but is critical of philosophy in a positive or corrective way; it digests and transforms the very content of philosophy. Precisely as non-philosophy, Laruelle says, it has the advantage of avoiding some of philosophy's major problems. A central problem Laruelle identifies involves the long tradition in philosophy of assessing reality first by reducing it to dualistic or dialectical oppositions, such as that between immanence and transcendence, or between being and existence. From this oppositional starting point, philosophers are able to secure and legitimate their position as grand unifiers of a diffuse complex of opposing structures. Rejecting the traditional enterprise as illusory at best, Laruelle claims that non-philosophy begins with reality as a basic, undivided, undetermined unity. This alternative starting point offers a new way of examining humanity in direct relation to the One, prior to difference. As one critic put it, Laruelle seeks to "engage reality from the position of the immanence of reality itself." (Burk 2012, xiii) The aim of his non-philosophical approach is to build a theory of humanity alongside philosophy.

The term non-philosophy can be traced in the continental tradition to a lecture by Merleau-Ponty, entitled, "Philosophy and Non-Philosophy Since Hegel." Laruelle adopted the term in his rethinking of the Real, which he characterizes as "the One", or "radical immanence". These are two key concepts in Laruelle that were missing in his study of Deleuze, Levinas and Derrida, but discovered in the work of Michel Henry. (Mullarkey and Smith 2012, 239) A notion of radical immanence, one that included the possibility of transcendence, can be found in Henry's phenomenology. (Henry 2008) However, in Laruelle's understanding of the term, the One displaces not only Heideggerian Being, but also Henry's concept of transcendence. It describes the human Real without identifying any ontological difference between, say, Being and existence, or immanence and transcendence. And yet the Real is not to

be confused with essence. Rather, it is the basis of lived reality (similar to Henry's notion of "life"). It is all that exists—autonomous, non-relational, non-representable, undefinable, and unknowable. In a similar vein, Laruelle provides an intrepid defense of immanence, one that eludes philosophy, phenomenology, psychoanalysis, and the human sciences. He likens immanence to interiority, in the sense that it cannot reveal itself from outside of itself. Further, Laruelle says that if it exists, it is no longer real. (Laruelle, 2013, 37) But as Ray Brassier notes, the Real is not nothing, it is not "Sartre's nihilating 'for-itself' puncturing the opacity of the 'in-itself.'" (Brassier 2007, 137) Laruelle's refusal to define the human has been likened to Sartre's rejection of any definable human essence, although, as John O'Maoilearca notes, Laruelle goes beyond this by rejecting nothingness as well, in so far as it is understood in relation to Being. (O'Maoilearca 2015, 183)

Laruelle challenges us to engage in non-philosophy to examine humanity at a level of abstraction beyond the relationship between being and nothingness, to understand humanity generically as indivisible. Laruelle says repeatedly that non-philosophy is the practice of thinking according to the Real—that is, thinking the irreducible that is presupposed in thought, separated from the world. Non-philosophy is that which determines "in-the-last-instance a subject *for* the relation of representation and the unrepresentable proper to philosophy" (Laruelle 2015a, 32). As such, it is the radical inversion of philosophy (ibid., 48). Philosophy labors under the old categories that prevent it from being a liberatory tool. Laruelle believes that while we are "condemned to philosophy" and to history, and "condemned to confront the global crime-form" (ibid., 126), non-philosophy can best assist us both in theorizing without totalization, and in foregrounding victims of mass crimes against humanity.

The difficulty in comprehending Laruelle's non-philosophy is that, although it takes the content of philosophy for its content, it resists being understood within philosophy. But if philosophy cannot be used to understand non-philosophy, then the whole enterprise of non-philosophy is thwarted from the outset. Brassier, for instance, argues that "to claim I harbor some sort of preontological understanding of my own being-human is to plunge straight back into Heidegger's *Dasein*. Alternatively, to assert, as Laruelle does, that one already 'knows' oneself to be human in and through radical immanence, is simply to misuse the verb, 'to know'". (Brassier 2007, 137) Brassier is right, Laruelle's intent is pre-ontological (it is easy to see Henry's influence here). It is no surprise he has garnered criticism for being overly obtuse, even though *Victims* is credited with being his most accessi-

ble work. Others, such as John Mullarkey, wonder about the extent to which Laruelle's non-philosophy can be understood, since it is philosophically unthinkable; perhaps it can only be "glimpsed." (Mullarkey, 2006, 150) All told, grappling with Laruelle's non-philosophy requires the suspension of many of our closely held philosophical assumptions to appreciate his approach to victims and intellectuals.

The Dominant Intellectual

Laruelle presents a portrait of the dominant intellectual in an early chapter of *Intellectuals and Power*. He sees the dominant intellectual as someone who takes up the controlling power of philosophy to the detriment of victims, and in so doing actually sublimates philosophy. In Laruelle's view, the dominant intellectual proceeds from certain philosophical basis, such as "a cause," or "better still, a principal affect," that is contingent on division and opposition. In so doing the dominant intellectual relegates philosophy to the background, where it is exercised in the forms of mediation and mediatized (Laruelle 2015a, 54). According to Laruelle, the "primacy of division, which signals the intellectual's abstract character," is manifested empirically and historically and is marked by ideological features. The dominant intellectual acts, clarifies, analyzes, and resolves ambiguity to reveal the truth. In placing the abstract principle of justice as the dominant value in their defense of victims, dominant intellectuals displace the ultimate end of philosophy, the human. (ibid., 55) In Laruelle's view, such intellectuals also err in the way they adopt other values and causes, such as human rights and the environment, by treating them as absolutes. To be sure, Laruelle is not the first to be critical of the economy of intellectuals. Consider Raymond Aron's critique in *The Opium of the Intellectuals*, a 1955 publication Laruelle cites. Aron did not spare the proletariat, the revolutionary, or the reactionary as he dissected the ideologies that imprisoned them in their lofty positions that were cut off from consequences. For Aron, a little skepticism would go a long way to keep politically inspired intellectuals from falling prey to fanaticism and mythologies. Like Aron, Laruelle finds fault with traditional intellectuals of all stripes—conservative, liberal, and revolutionary (including Marxists)—and claims for himself a nonpartisan position without falling into quietism. But even Aron is not spared in Laruelle's broader critique. Laruelle claims that Aron "rests on" sociology without questioning the Enlightenment assumptions in his work.

On Laruelle's account, the dominant intellectual is a garden-variety ideologue who "considers existence to be like a theatre, which comes to him from the farthest ends of philosophy." (Laruelle 2015a, 67) Such an intellectual thus carries out his mission as if it were a drama played out between himself and the victims he serves. He acts as a self-appointed mediator of history who needs "to inscribe his action within a public space and time...(as an) exhibition." (ibid.) Here, Laruelle is especially critical of dominant intellectuals who capitalize on the media to act out their drama. These "media intellectuals" make their appearances with victims in newspapers, voice their indignation on televised interviews, and express their moral platitudes in opinion columns. But their actions serve only to reinscribe victims in public discourse, without meaningful thought or examination. By itself, media attention does nothing to reveal victims' reality. In the current information age, victims are both seen and unseen—i.e., they are widely exposed in cyberspace, but never properly understood from a non-philosophical perspective. Media intellectuals, Bernard-Henri Lévy among them, exploit media power to buttress their own visibility in the public domain, and in so doing they end up exploiting the very victims they seek to serve. In Laruelle's assessment, a media intellectual is nothing more than a publicity hound, a "super victimizing machine," who "produces opinion for opinion." (2015a, 139)

Indeed, Laruelle questions the effectiveness of the dominant intellectuals' efforts in serving victims. He contends that intellectuals generally see their role as mediators where conflicts arise and work to promote small "provisional peace" between adversaries. The problem, says Laruelle, is that they do so without questioning how their actions might reinscribe power at the next level. Despite good intentions, Laruelle believes that they succeed only in recording and redistributing the ills of society, locking victims in a web of persecution. In this way, intellectuals unwittingly "relay exploitation and universalize it in struggling locally against it—this appearance is their true object." (Ibid., 62) Their work only serves to perpetuate an inescapable circle of injustice in the name of justice.

Laruelle's staunch critique of dominant intellectuals should not be taken as an endorsement of political apathy. While he believes that political engagement is an important aspect of being in the world, he is suspicious of the drawing up of sides by intellectuals in an exercise that can only reinscribe injustice. Laruelle turns to his reading of Foucault to clarify his own position. In a famous conversation between Foucault and Deleuze, Foucault offers a critique of the very notion of "speaking for others," and describes a change in which the masses, who are no longer depend on the intellectual for knowledge, are able to

speak for themselves. (Foucault 1977) For Laruelle, this challenges the traditional relationship between victims and intellectuals, as it reconfigures the intellectual/victim dyad in a fundamental way. Laruelle embraces the non-totalizing theory that Foucault offers. Foucault claims that, in a capitalist system, the goal of the politically engaged intellectual is to expose hidden political relationships. "The intellectual's role is no longer to place himself 'somewhat ahead and to the side' in order to express the stifled truth of the collectivity; rather it is to struggle against the forms of power that transform him into its object and instrument in the sphere of 'knowledge,' 'truth,' 'consciousness' and 'discourse'" (Foucault 1977, 208) For Foucault as it is for Laruelle, the point is not conscious-raising for the liberation of the oppressed who depend on intellectuals for this knowledge, but rather the seizing of power alongside of the oppressed.

Sartre's "Plea for Intellectuals"

While Laruelle is critical of media pundits who resemble what Sartre might call engaged intellectuals, elements of Laruelle's and Foucault's position on the role of intellectuals can be found in Sartre's work on the subject, written a few years before. In his Prologue to *Intellectuals and Power*, Petit remarks that not much has been published on public intellectuals since Sartre. Laruelle believes what is needed now is a new theory on intellectuals from a non-philosophical approach. To assess this claim it is important to examine here Sartre's position on the responsibility of intellectuals.

Sartre's portrayal of the committed writer, his idea of an intellectual *par excellence*, is found in a series of essays that were first published in 1947, under the title, *What is Literature?* In this work, Sartre maintains that there is a special responsibility that comes with the privilege of writing for an audience. Specifically, the writer has a responsibility to remain authentic, both to one's audience and to oneself. Authenticity demands that the writer discloses the world truthfully so as to reveal its many contradictions. It is by revealing such contradictions that the writer can take a decisive stance against quietism by committing oneself—and inviting others to commit likewise—to the collaborative task of creating a more open future for all. The authentic intellectual must also strive vigilantly to be reflective and critical of one's own role in promoting social change. Ultimately, the goal of the committed writer is to forge a mutual bond with the audience in what could best be described as a *mitsein* or "we-subject," a reciprocal relationship that at once affirms the freedom of the writer and the free-

dom of the reader. In this *mitsein*, the reader recognizes the writer as a free subject seeking to represent reality with integrity and from a particular lived experience, while the writer, whose work aims authentically at engaging the reader in dialogue, recognizes the reader's subjectivity as interpreter and respondent to what is being represented.

Sartre would revisit this notion of the committed intellectual in a series of lectures he delivered in Japan in 1965, subsequently published as "A Plea for Intellectuals," and also in an interview he gave after the events of May 1968, published under the title, "A Friend of the People." In both publications, Sartre has remained faithful to his earlier sketch of the responsible writer, while incorporating into that sketch crucial elements that marked his philosophical turn toward Marxism and his political involvement in key events of the period.

In "A Plea for Intellectuals" Sartre begins by distinguishing the true intellectual from its many poor substitutes throughout history. He observes that, up until the 14th Century, French clerics, who had something of a monopoly on knowledge, were guardians of a "sacred ideology" (Sartre, 1976a, 234) that was in reality a "totalitarian myth" designed to preserve the Church's dominant position in the existing social hierarchy (Ibid., 233). The cleric was eventually displaced by a rising class of specialists who were called upon to create an "ideological complex" that served to validate the beliefs and values of the very class into which they were born; namely, the bourgeoisie. By articulating the objective spirit of their own class, the *philosophes*, i.e., the privileged "organic intellectuals" of the Enlightenment, could only advocate a "bourgeois humanism" (Ibid., 236) that fell neatly in line with capitalist ideology.

Sartre then identifies in contemporary society various "technicians of knowledge," a group of highly educated experts and professionals who are mostly recruited from the middle class, and whose function is to deploy their specialized knowledge to advance the current system. In so far as their work serves to maintain the status quo, these technicians act, albeit unwittingly in many cases, as transmitters of established values and custodians of tradition. Sartre maintains that technicians who are content to embrace the dominant ideology exist "in a state of wholly bad faith" (Ibid., 244). They not true intellectuals in his mind. However, if a technician

becomes aware of the particularism of his ideology and cannot reconcile himself to it; if he sees that he has interiorized authoritarian principles in the form of self-censorship; (...) if he refuses to be a subaltern agent of bourgeois hegemony... then the agent of practical knowledge becomes a monster, that is to say, an intellectual;

someone who attends to what concerns him (...) and whom others refer to a man who interferes in what does not concern him. (Ibid., original italics)

Here Sartre invokes his earlier image of the committed writer who is thoroughly engaged in the world, a disquieting "monster" who, out of concern for others, openly challenges the official capitalist ideology that perpetuates injustice against the oppressed. Modern-day intellectuals, says Sartre, are born of class conflict. Imbued with humanist values, these technicians subscribe to the belief that all people are equal. And yet they are acutely aware of the privileged existence they enjoy, one that stands in stark contradiction with the deprivation of the underclass (Ibid., 239). Reality betrays their sense of humanist egalitarianism. Sartre further infers that the technicians experience a deeper tension here. On the one hand, they know that they ought to renounce their privilege. But since they are themselves the product of this privilege, they cannot renounce their privilege without undoing themselves, which works against their natural instinct toward self-preservation (Ibid., 240).

Furthermore, Sartre contends that all technicians, as professional seekers of knowledge, are defined by what he describes as a fundamental contradiction between professional universalism and class particularism (Ibid., 245). Technicians live with a penetrating tension between universalizing knowledge and particularizing ideology. Their work, despite its purported universality, serves only the particular interests of the dominant class. Sartre gives the example of physicians to illustrate this point. As scientists, doctors endeavor to establish universal forms of knowledge and practice. Their quest for a cure for cancer is intended to serve the common good because it has the potential to cure not just any particular person, but all patients in the global community who are afflicted with the disease. But in reality, doctors find themselves in an elitist system that is controlled by bourgeois ideology and driven by profit. Any remedy they discover becomes a rare commodity accessible only to a privileged few in affluent developed countries. Even as they deny, in the name of objectivity and freedom, that there is such a thing as "bourgeois science," they know all too well that their research is undeniably bourgeois and thus particularist in character and practice. They can see that they are effectively agents of the same ruling class that had produced them, which runs contrary to their mission as universal humanists. What's more, this realization stirs up in them a profound inner conflict. "In as much as their specialty is always the universal," Sartre argues, technicians of knowledge "embody a contestation of the very particularisms with which they have been injected and which they cannot contest without contesting themselves"

(Ibid., 242). This leads Sartre to conclude that technicians are the living embodiment of what Hegel called "unhappy consciousness" (Ibid., 243).

It is this unhappy consciousness that transforms some technicians of knowledge into intellectuals. True intellectuals understand that they cannot confront the particularism of the ruling ideology without also confronting themselves as products, guardians, and beneficiaries of that ideology. And they do so at great existential cost, by engaging in honest self-investigations that call their entire existence into question. Indeed, it is not possible for them to transform themselves without eradicating the contradictions that formed their very selves. Thus intellectuals have before them the first necessary task of liberating themselves from oppressive thoughts, attitudes, and sentiments that had been inculcated in them by the dominant ideology. That is to say, they must "relentlessly combat their own class" (Ibid., 249). This cannot be achieved simply by denouncing bourgeois ideology with rational arguments, but more importantly by committing themselves to the unending process of examining and reexamining their own values and actions to root out any trace of bourgeois particularism. This is true, for example, of the impetus to combat the imperial ideology of racism. As Sartre explains,

racism is a concrete everyday attitude, and consequently a man can sincerely hold anti-racist opinions of a universal type, while in his deepest recesses, under the influence of his childhood, he remains a racist—so that one day he will involuntarily behave like one in ordinary life. Thus the intellectual's labor will come to nothing, even if he demonstrates the aberrant character of racism, unless he constantly returns to himself to liquidate the traces of racism within him left over by his childhood, by a rigorous investigation of the 'incomparable monster' that is his self. (Ibid., 249)

It is through vigilant self-investigations that intellectuals can achieve the self-awareness needed to transition from being guardians of the status quo to becoming guardians of the "fundamental end," which Sartre defines as "the emancipation, universalization, and hence humanization of man (Ibid., 266)." To distance themselves from the dominant ideology, intellectuals must also situate themselves among the very people whose existence bears witness to the inherent contradictions of that ideology (Ibid., 256). In other words, they must position themselves alongside society's most deprived, in an effort to learn their language and adopt their point of view. Here, Sartre is careful to stress that it is not the intellectuals' place to speak for the underclass. In his mind, not only are the masses capable of self-representation, but the fundamental end of which he speaks cannot be achieved without

the masses' direct involvement at every level. Speaking of the importance of the collective voices of the intellectuals and the masses, Sartre opines,

a newspaper today that is created for the masses should comprise a certain proportion of intellectuals and a certain proportion of workers, and that the articles should be written neither by the intellectuals nor by the workers, but by both together. The workers explain what they are and what they are doing, and the intellectuals are there to understand, to learn, and at the same time to give things every so often a certain type of generalization (Sartre, 1976b, 294).

Putting themselves at the service of the masses, intellectuals should make use of the knowledge and techniques they have acquired, to work for causes that are "genuinely universal," such as "the right of a people to determine its own future." (Ibid., 289) Far from advocating a paternalistic agenda that certifies intellectuals as leaders speaking and deciding for the less fortunate, Sartre insists that true "intellectuals must learn to understand the universal that the masses want, in reality, in the immediate, in this very moment" (Ibid., 294). Sartre ends his plea by returning to familiar themes from his earlier works. Intellectuals "must understand that they cannot liberate themselves unless others are liberated" (Sartre, 1976a, 255). Ultimately, intellectuals are the self-aware technicians of knowledge who choose to walk in solidarity with the masses, with the hope that, as a community of we-subjects, they may bring about their freely chosen ends.

Victims and Generic Intellectuals

Laruelle positions his critique of intellectuals within a broad theory of human beings, one that privileges victims who, he insists, have long been forgotten by philosophy. In his view, philosophy has been more interested in defending of its own power and dominance than in defending victims. By contrast, a non-philosophical theory of intellectuals and victims is non-authoritarian and victim-centered. Here, Laruelle invites us to imagine an intellectual whose "object was no longer justice, truth or other abstract values, but only the victim as the 'real' content of these values" (2015a, 5). This marks the emergence of the determined or generic intellectual, a concept Laruelle developed in *Intellectuals and Power* and *General Theory of Victims*. In both works, Laruelle contrasts the dominant intellectual (what Sartre calls the false intellectual) with the determined intellectual, i.e., one who is determined by the victim. In *Victims*, the latter is replaced by the term generic intellectual. Under Laruelle's non-philosophical approach, the traditional treatment of the power relation

between intellectuals and victims is reversed, such that intellectuals are seen as contingent on and characterized by victims. He seeks to situate the "figure of the intellectual of a kind that no longer rises up from spontaneity, in the Nietzschean or Foucauldian sense of the pleb, nor from the consciousness of an avant garde illuminating what remains of the proletariat" (ibid., 57).

According to Laruelle, determined intellectuals occupy a new "sphere" of "intellectual existence" in the world (ibid, 111). What differentiates the determined intellectual from a dominant one is that the former does "victim thinking" without assuming a position of power as a "philosopher of the Victim." The determined intellectual "is thrown into the victims" in a Heideggerian sense, but is not "in the midst of victims." (2015a, 107) This intellectual is not a spokesperson or representative of victims but a "witness cloned from victims by the Victim-in-person," who does not assign ethical values a priori but allows such values to "determine themselves according to the true reality of these victims" (ibid, 142). In the new sphere of victim-thinking, the determined or generic intellectual sees victims directly "in-person," as it were, as a person apart from representations that overdetermine them as the persecuted, the powerless, the enslaved, and the like. This non-philosophical approach to understanding the victim as Victim-in-person effectively transforms the relation between intellectuals and victims, and correspondingly, the role of the intellectual vis-a-vis the victim.

For Laruelle, Victim-in person is an important concept, for it is that through which humanity as such can be understood. He describes victims in general terms as those "without-life lived experiences, the *Erlebnisse* rather than the categories of individuals," and "the non-individual lived experiences of the being-exploited, of the being-excluded, those of the being-murdered, of the being-persecuted, of the being-humiliated." (2015b, 26) Ultimately, "the victim is the condition that under-determines the intellectual to act without claiming to be able to define or determine who is a victim." (ibid., 63) Laruelle thus rejects any notion of an absolute Victim-in-itself, in favor of generic victims who exist pre-predicatively prior to thought or representation, allowing us to "comprehend what we mean by generic man, this of-the-last-instance essence of humans." (ibid., 62) This notion of determination in the last instance, originally attributed to Marx and Engels for historical materialism, now has a Laruellean connotation. The intellectual needs the victim not for self-aggrandisement but rather as the way to understand the Real. The intellectual must be defined in relation to the victim and be underdetermined by the victim in a way that avoids ideology.

It is important to stress that Laruelle sees Victim-in-person as an aspect of the Human-in-person. The latter refers to the undefined person-without-attributes who is neither a psychological nor a political subject but an effect of the Real in-the-last-instance, and real though non-existent.² The Victim-in-person is a formal symbol for the most concrete human subject insofar as it "*sustains* a relation to the world" (2015b, 24). And as a formal symbol it captures all positions of victims while remaining indifferent to specific actions and historical moments. Put differently, it is that which determines humanity in the last instance, yet it is not represented in any specific way. Laruelle aims at theorizing about unsung, unrepresented human suffering that are too often eclipsed by lofty ideals and causes that crusaders champion. In the end, he offers a non-philosophical theory that avoids building any profile of victims, constructing any victim types, and, of course, providing any conceptual hierarchy of victim. This explains why present-day victims and their concrete circumstances go unmentioned in his work. For example, consider the homeless person who poses a quandary for the dominant intellectual by refusing to be taken care of by the city. Which is better in this situation--autonomy or paternalism? Laruelle acknowledges that philosophy can defend both positions. And yet a non-philosophical approach reveals the determined intellectual as one who sees the "initially forced hand (the presupposed Real) and not a final one ... But one that is, at the same time, as if void of determination." (2015a, 88) In part, this is because the determined intellectual is not thinking about the welfare of specific homeless persons, but rather the welfare of humanity as such. Such an intellectual is interested in understanding the possibility that homelessness presents beyond the historical moment, a possibility of disenfranchisement rather than unity of humanity.

Laruelle laments that traditional philosophy will always overlook the reality of the Victim-in-person. Consider an example provided by John O'Maolearca:

The prostitute (in Mumbai, or anywhere else) cannot be seen for herself in person, by philosophy. As radical poor or victim-in-person, she resists and is indifferent to the philosophical lens. In any case, philosophy always holds the camera and cast itself in the main role, the image of the Perfect Human in the center of every shot even when it is apparently looking at victims. As non-philosopher, though, Laruelle has always been 'on the side' of the fallen (including 'fallen women'), the unrecorded victims and outcasts. This is not because he is their supposed spokesman or representative but because of the orientation of non-philosophical thought, which is cameraless and begins from their 'side' by default. (O'Maolearca 2015, 94)

² The translator actually uses "Man-in-person" which we have challenged for obvious reasons.

The determined or generic intellectual must engage in an *a priori defense* of humanity. This can be done only through a non-philosophical lens, with its inventiveness and its openness in understanding humanity. Laruelle challenges intellectuals to understand the possibility of victimization outside of the Hegelian master/slave dialectic. It is important for them to avoid philosophy's reappropriation of victims within a circular logic of victims and their prosecutors, where the terms, victim and executioner, can be reversible in a sort of "reciprocal approximation of the Victim or executioner" (2015a, 78). Laruelle refers to Sartre here, contending that "this proximity is a problem that the philosophers are unable not to put forward. I think that Sartre has put it forward through the gaze. The gaze, but not only the gaze, is a mode of victimological distance." (ibid.) In non-philosophy, the relationship between generic intellectuals and the Victim-in-person allows for victims to determine their own meaning between representation and non-representation. It is a relationship in which the intellectuals understand that their cause is not history or society, making it possible for them "to carry on a certain emancipatory or liberatory relation to history and society (in relation to philosophy and to the State reunited as a thought-world)." (2015a, 10) To see this point, we must keep in mind that, for Laruelle, humanity is not reducible to a subject and its relations. As Joshua Ramey puts it, persecution is part of a

continuous revolt against a World whose most basic form of violence consists in the utterly banal attempt to relate or correlate every struggle, need, or concern to a struggle, need, or concern within the World. ... (But in non-philosophy,) the human struggle is a struggle precisely because it is not the struggle of the World, but separate from the World, in the last instance. (Ramey 2012, 84)

Unlike dominant intellectuals who "believe in all-history, in all-politics," and for whom the "specific object, the World, is carried, transported, by historical circumstances and situations," determined intellectuals are underdetermined by history as they refuse to construe humanity merely as a part of history. (2015a, 116) Likewise, as an aspect of Human-in-person, Victim-in-person is not trapped in history but is outside of history since its *a priori* nature is apart from the world. While it is an aspect of the Human-in-person, humanity is not contingent on victimization although it remains a permanent possibility for everyone. (Laruelle, 2015b, 125) This leads Laruelle to conclude that determined or generic intellectuals, who are aware of the seductive power of philosophy, have the task of comprehending victims through a radical understanding of humanity outside of philosophy.

Insurrection

Laruelle summarizes the difference between the victim and the Victim-in-person in this way: "the represented victim causes us to think; the Victim-in-person forces thought or makes us think it as a force without providing the means to think with." (2015a, 138) How then should non-philosophy theorize about victims? Laruelle provides no political strategy here. Moreover, in rejecting philosophy, he has done away with the usual philosophical assumptions about the human being, about human nature and human essence. Indeed, he is even suspicious of philosophies of history. He has effectively excluded all of the usual tools that would guide us in thinking *about* victims, though he would correct us and urge us to *think with* or think *according to* the Real. Laruelle insists that the reality of victims lies in the fact that all humans can be persecuted and that insurrection is possible. In fact, the proper role of the intellectual is to assist victims to become "ordinary messiahs" who can bring about an insurrectional future world with new possibilities for justice. Oddly, the idea of insurrection, which Laruelle invokes in the very subtitle of *Intellectuals and Power*, has only a single reference in that text, appearing near the end in a discussion of the demand for justice. There Laruelle insists that a "society conscious of crime" needs a "new critique of intellectual reason." (2015a, 132) That is to say, a non-standard philosophy is needed to rethink the traditional approach that divides humanity into an opposition between criminals and victims.

In *Victims*, Laruelle again stresses the importance of generic intellectuals to be part of the process to bring about an insurrection, but that they must do so without over-determining victims, as philosophy has done by representing victims as hostages locked in dialectical relationships (e.g., crime and punishment, masters and slaves, oppressors and oppressed). Laruelle also faults the engaged intellectual's inclination to classifying victims under specific labels (e.g., survivors, evil-sufferers, casualties of crimes against humanity, etc.). It is the generic intellectual who avoids any determinant representation of victims and engages in the process of "generically merging or superposing himself with the victim for an experience that will not be a new contemplation but a unique knowledge that inextricably holds for both the victim and himself." (2015b, 55) In Laruelle's view, media intellectuals have confused "superposition with identification." The unique knowledge produced by superposition with victims is important because, after all, intellectuals can also be victims in so far as the Victim-in-person is an aspect of the Human-in-person. Just as the human-in-person, as a clone of the Real, is not any particular subject produced by philosophical discourse, the victim-in-person

likewise is not any individuated victim represented by any particular category, space, or time. This is again Laruelle's way of negating any notion of an absolute victim in itself.

Keeping in mind that generic intellectuals do not think of victims representationally as particular subjects, but rather according-to the Victim-in-person as part of humanity in general, Laruelle maintains that the proper relationship of intellectuals to victims is compassion. Compassion is what allows the intellectual and the victim to share in the suffering of all people, without reducing either one to victimhood. It is in this sense that Laruelle speaks of compassion as insurrection. As he puts it, compassion is "the fusion" in "non-representative space" of the victim and "the thought attached to it. ... (It is a fusion) through a collision of the essentially generic victim and the essentially philosophical intellectual in the Victim-in-person." (2015b, 114). Here, Laruelle draws a sharp contrast between compassion and pity. Whereas in compassion the intellectual operates in fusion with the victim-in person, in pity, the intellectual operates from a position of superiority and power founded on the separation of victims from non-victims. Compassion allows for an ethical assistance to victims that is non-philosophical, a means by which the generic intellectual thinks about humanity in its radical immanence across differences in time and culture. In this way compassion discloses intellectuals as generic victims. As Alexander Galloway puts it, Laruelle is endorsing something of a "mystical maoism" here by insisting "that we are all always already victims, simply by virtue of being human. The problem is not so much victimization itself, but the decision to divide the world into victims and not." (Galloway 2013, 103)

Laruelle's non-philosophical approach to understanding intellectuals and victims ushers in a new, "non-standard" ethics for humanity. Though justice is necessary, Laruelle avoids all absolutes and refrains from representing justice empirically or historically. By refusing all oppositions, all divisions, and all power relations, Laruelle places both intellectuals and victims back in humanity in its radically indeterminate form. Ethics begins with the generic victim that is none of us and all of us. Under this new ethics the proper role of the intellectual is to assist in the victims' uprising by fusing with the Victim-in-person in compassion and care. By superpositioning with the victim, the generic intellectual recognizes the victim as under-determining and produces knowledge of the victim's uprising through this recognition. It is the victim's task to discern the demand for justice, and the intellectual's task provisionally to think through the content, goals, and values of political engagement (e.g. justice, globalization, equality), all the while positioning the Victim-in-person as the "under-determining condition of justice." (2015b, xx) Whereas Laruelle believes in a "true uprising of victims" that

can under-determine the crime and the criminal, he cautions that it must be "taken up and revived by the intellectual compelled to a future-thought." (2015b, 130) His hope here is that the transformation of the intellectual to a generic, future-oriented intellectual will be transformative for society, history and philosophy. The future intellectual recognizes that the Human-in-person does not allow classification of victims, for victims on the generic level are unrepresentable and therefore resist victimhood.

Conclusion

Laruelle's recent work on victims is an important contribution in post-continental thought, one that disrupts a trajectory for thinking about the philosophical intellectual, a trajectory that began with a plea from the last century's most celebrated example. Laruelle answers Sartre's "Plea" by raising the stakes. Rather than championing the oppressed by shining a bright light on criminals, executioners, murderous butchers, tyrants, corrupt regimes and the like, Laruelle calls upon us first to inspect philosophy itself, its limits, its tyrannical use of power, as well as the ways in which intellectuals, in serving philosophy, betray victims. Laruelle's theory of victims, which focuses on humanity in-the-last-instance, is non-political in so far as it represents non-philosophy. His notions of Human-in-person and Victim-in-person are non-binary, non-oppositional and non-authoritarian.

Reading Sartre after Laruelle, it is tempting to ask how close Sartre comes to being what Laruelle describes as a generic intellectual. To what extent is Sartre's "Plea" one that comes from the future? Sartre always dared to imagine a classless society, one that was thoroughly egalitarian and devoid of hierarchies of all sorts. In his later writings, Sartre shows himself to be much closer to a generic intellectual in the Laruellean sense. There we find Sartre seeking a philosophy of history, a path forward after Marxism, and theorizing about a conception of human fraternity without division through the notion of the "we" in *Hope Now*. Indeed, we find a resolute Sartre trying to escape the bondage of philosophy and ontology, and casting doubt on the relevance of the intellectual *qua* intellectual while remaining politically committed. It is interesting to trace the evolution of the 'we' in Sartre. There are hints that he has moved from a dialectical model in *Being and Nothingness* to a conflict model in the *Critique*, and finally to a non-totalizing conception of fraternity in *Hope Now*. At the very end of his life, Sartre, while struggling to imagine something better than a competitive model of human relationships marked by violence and terror, would define the 'we' or 'community'

simply as "a body of people who struggle as one." (Sartre 1996, 67) If we take this definition as representing Sartre's third ethics, it would appear to be one that comes close to a Laruellean post-totalizing, non-hierarchical and non-authoritarian understanding of the generic human community, even though the notions of 'Human-in-person' and 'in-the-last instance' are obviously missing in Sartre. The question of how such a human community based on reciprocity would come to pass is left largely unaddressed in both Laruelle and Sartre. To be sure, Sartre would argue that the communal relations among human beings that he envisioned will not emerge out of a mere conceptualization of fraternity by intellectuals, but will require a real change in historical conditions. Ultimately, Laruelle and Sartre have merely shown that what is needed is a different view of philosophy (or non-philosophy) of history.

Laurelle, for his part, refuses the role of public intellectual, while preferring to stay in the non-philosophical trenches. In doing so, he leaves aside the pressing question of our ethical obligations to others, one that has remained a central concern for Sartre. We see this in his quick dismissal of Sartre during his interview with Petit, when Petit reminds him of Sartre's famous comment on the limits of literature in confronting the evils of starvation. "In the face of a dying child," Sartre acknowledges, "*Nausea* has no weight." (Sartre, 1965, 13) In prioritizing survival in this remark, Sartre admits to a progression in his own thinking. As he confesses, "I have served a slow apprenticeship to the real. I have seen children starving to death." (Ibid.) Such comments fail to impress Laruelle, however, who considers these examples as an "overwhelming and intimidating abstraction, almost a sin against children and against literature." (Laruelle 2015a, 70) Rather than a "universal obsession with survival," which the recent refugee crisis and acts of terrorism in France might proffer, Laruelle opts for a non-humanitarian path, allowing "only impossible definitions of the Victim." In this dust-up with Sartre, indirect though it is, we see the daylight between them. Laruelle does not dismiss Sartrean activism; he sees a role for politics and political action but deliberately avoids offering any comprehensive political philosophy. Instead, Laruelle points to a path forward that holds in tension a riveting focus on (undefinable) victims (presently an inescapable condition of humanity), while also theorizing about the Human-in-person, an abstraction. Preempting the inevitable demand for an ethics, he introduces a non-standard ethics that offers a view of compassion, and relies on the radical non-action of unpower through the superposition of intellectuals with victims. His general theory will incite no revolts by victims, save for one – a possible revolt against doing a certain kind of philosophy. It is a bold call to inventing a truly non-authoritarian intellectual practice, even as critics might render that an impossible task.

Laruelle's work on victims suggests what it might mean for non-philosophy to have a preference for the destitute, for the least privileged in global society. The fleeting glances in media coverage of widespread disasters that such people suffer provide a starting point for the work of future-oriented intellectuals.

Prof. Dr. Constance L. Mui, Loyola University New Orleans, USA, [cmui\[at\]loyno.edu](mailto:cmui[at]loyno.edu)
Prof. Dr. Julien S. Murphy, College of Arts and Sciences, University of Southern Maine,
Portland ME, USA, [jmurphy\[at\]maine.edu](mailto:jmurphy[at]maine.edu)

References

- Anderson, Taylor W. "On 2017's Darkest Day, Utahns Gather to Mourn the 117 Homeless and Formerly Homeless People Who Died this Year," The Salt Lake Tribune, December 22, 2017, <<http://www.sltrib.com/news/politics/2017/12/22/on-2017s-darkest-day-utahns-gather-to-mourn-the-117-homeless-and-formerly-homeless-people-who-died-this-year/>>.
- Aron, Raymond. *The Opium of the Intellectuals*. Translated by Terence Kilmartin and Lucile Brockway, New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1962.
- Belson, Ken and Jennifer Medina and Richard Pérez-Peña. "A Burst of Gunfire, a Pause, Then Carnage in Las Vegas That Would Not Stop." *The New York Times* October 2, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/02/us/las-vegas-shooting-live-updates.html?_r=0>.
- Brassier, Ray. *Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan Press, 2007.
- Burk, Drew S. *François Laruelle: Struggle and Utopia At The End Times of Philosophy*. Translated by Drew S. Burk and Anthony Paul Smith, Minneapolis: Univocal Press, 2012.
- Foucault, Michel. "Intellectuals and Power: A Conversation between Michel Foucault and Giles Deleuze," in Donald F. Bouchard (ed.) *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews by Michel Foucault*. Translated by Bouchard and Sherry Simon, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977, 205-217.
- Galloway, Alexander R. "François Laruelle, *Théorie générale des victimes*." Review. *Parrhesia* 16, (2013), 102-105.

- Gangle, Rocco. *François Laruelle's Philosophies of Difference: A Critical Introduction and Guide*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013.
- Henry, Michel. *Material Phenomenology*. Translated by S. Davidson, New York: Fordham University Press, 2008.
- Hoey, Dennis. "Vigil in Portland to Honor 37 Homeless People Who Died this Year," December 18, 2017, *Portland Press Herald*, <<http://www.pressherald.com/2017/12/18/vigil-in-portland-to-honor-37-homeless-people-who-died-this-year/>>.
- Koehn, Alexandra. Highest Number of Homeless Deaths Recorded in 2017, News Channel 5 Network, Dec. 16, 2017, <<https://www.newschannel5.com/news/highest-number-of-homeless-deaths-recorded-in-2017>>.
- Laruelle, François. "Non-Philosophy, Weapon of Last Defence: An Interview with François Laruelle," translated by Anthony Paul Smith, in Mullarkey, John and Anthony Paul Smith (eds.). *Laruelle and Non-Philosophy*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012, 238-251.
- Laruelle, François (in conversation with Philippe Petit). *Intellectuals and Power: The Insurrection of the Victim*. Translated by Anthony Paul Smith. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015a.
- Laruelle, François. *General Theory of Victims*. Translated by Jessie Hock and Alex Dubilet. Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2015b.
- Luppi, Kathleen. "Candlelight Memorial Honors O.C. Homeless People Who Died This Year," *Los Angeles Times*, December 22, 2017, <<http://www.latimes.com/socal/daily-pilot/entertainment/tn-wknd-et-homeless-memorial-20171222-story.html>>.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. "Philosophy and Non-Philosophy Since Hegel." *Telos* No. 29, (1976): 43-105.
- Meyer, Eric D. "General Theory of Victims." Review. *Dialogue* No. 1, (2016): 1-3.
- Mullarkey, John. *Post-Continental Philosophy: An Outline*. New York: Continuum Press, 2006.
- O' Maoilearca, John. *All Thoughts are Equal, Laruelle and Nonhuman Philosophy*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015.
- Ramey, Joshua. "The Justice of Non-Philosophy," in John Mullarkey and Anthony Paul Smith (eds.) *Laurelle and Non-Philosophy*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul, "Sartre's explication sur *Les Mots*." Interview with Jacqueline Piatier, *Le Monde*, 18, April, 1965.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul, "A Plea for Intellectuals," in Jean-Paul Sartre. *Between Existentialism and Marxism*. New York: William Morrow, 1976, 228-285.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul, "A Friend of the People," in Jean-Paul Sartre. *Between Existentialism and Marxism*. New York: William Morrow, 1976, 286-298.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. *What is Literature and Other Essays*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988.

LABYRINTH Vol. 19, No. 2, Winter 2017

Sartre, Jean-Paul and Benny Lévy. *Hope Now: The 1980 Interviews*. Translated by Adrian Van Den Hoven. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.

Walsh, Declan and Nour Youssef, "Militants Kill 305 at Sufi Mosque in Egypt's Deadliest Terrorist Attack," November 24, 2017, *The New York Times*,

<<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/24/world/middleeast/mosque-attack-egypt.html>>