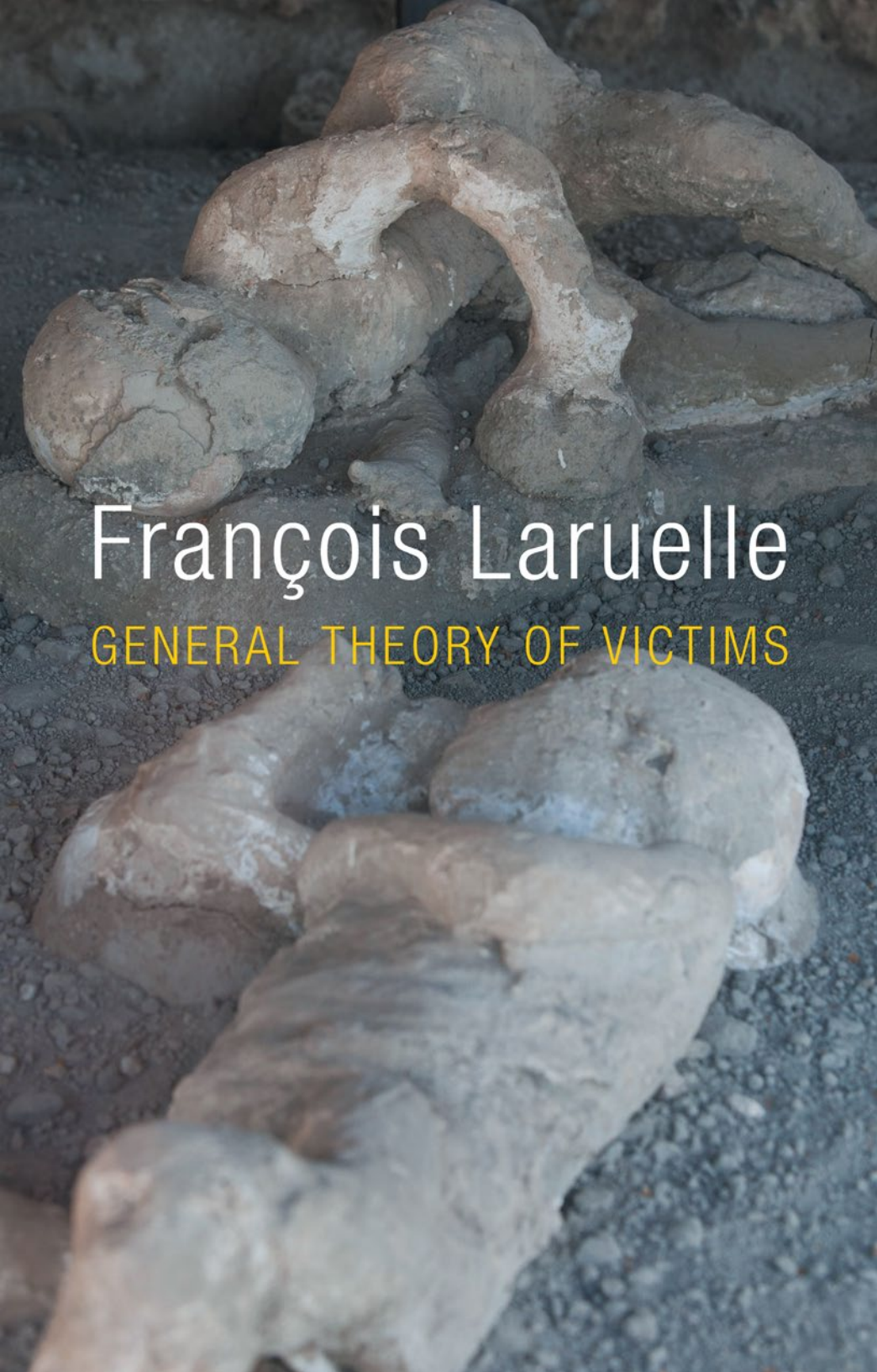




François Laruelle

GENERAL THEORY OF VICTIMS

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?

General Theory of Victims

François Laruelle

Translated by Jessie Hock and Alex Dubilet

polity

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Translators' Introduction

While translating *General Theory of Victims*, we have made a number of decisions that are decisive for the overall tone and style of the English text. Perhaps the most far-reaching of these concerns the gender of key theoretical terms – victim, intellectual, Man, Man-in-person, human, criminal, philosopher. In French, unlike in English, every word has a grammatical gender. “Victim,” for example, is feminine, while “intellectual” is masculine. The problem is intractable because it is two-sided: on the one hand, the text’s theoretical positions preclude these terms having any straightforward empirical reference. That is, Laruelle does not seem to intend for us to associate victims with the feminine or intellectuals with the masculine. On the other hand, stripping these terms and their pronouns of grammatical gender would create additional ambiguities in the English text. Although we contemplated using neuters for all of these terms in order to avoid overburdening the English with gendered implications, for the sake of clarity it was imperative to assign these terms distinct

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genders so that, for example, sentences with frequent pronominal references to both the intellectual and the victim could be parsed.

Because there is no truly elegant solution, we decided on a pragmatic one, which, furthermore, we believe at least partially reflects the theoretical orientation of Laruelle's argument. In our translation, several of these terms – Man, intellectual, criminal, and philosopher – take masculine pronouns. Generally speaking, these terms refer to figures or functions “in the world.” In contrast, we render the terms that are more specific to Laruelle's own lexicon – victim, Man-in-person – as neuter. Generally speaking, these terms refer to what Laruelle calls “generic” figures. This is by no means a perfect solution, particularly because many of these terms function in the text variously as “generic” *or* “in the world” (e.g. “Man” refers sometimes to a philosophical or worldly conception and, at others, to a generic figure equivalent to Man-in-person). It seemed to us that changing a single term's gender depending on context would be unnecessarily confusing; furthermore, doing so would have forced us to make theoretical decisions that are best left to the reader's interpretation.

In making some terms neuter, we do not want to suggest that the victim or Man-in-person necessarily lack gender, but rather that their gender is radically underdetermined. Given that Laruelle argues that a general theory of victims cannot assume that the object designated by the term “victim” is known, the indeterminacy of the neuter seemed appropriate, reminding readers that there is no easy designation for the victim and thus preventing a false sense of concreteness. We chose the masculine pronoun for the terms Man, intellectual,

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criminal, and philosopher in order to hew to the French, and also because at least one of these terms – Man – is obviously gendered, even in English. On the other hand, although we considered using the feminine pronoun for the victim in order to avoid any masculinist tendencies, we did not because such a gesture would, inversely, overdetermine Laruelle's argument which does not emphasize the gendering of victims. It seemed important not to imply that the text theorizes the gendering of victims as feminine when in fact it does not.

Another decision was how to translate the term *vécu*, which Laruelle uses frequently. We have rendered its adjectival forms as "lived" and its substantive forms as "lived experience." We would like to warn readers that, although the term is directly connected to the German *Erlebnis*, Laruelle's use of the term no longer carries a strong association with consciousness or subjective experience. Indeed, in a number of places even the substantive form of the term could have been rendered more directly and simply as "the lived," but we opted for consistency over elegance in this instance. Out of the same concern for consistency, we rendered *vécu-sans-vie* as "lived-experience-without-life."

Several singular phrases might give the reader pause. Laruelle coins a number of concepts in this text. We have chosen to render the unusual French expression *une fois chaque fois* as "once each time" in order to stress the contemporaneity of the occurrence described. For his term *avant-priorité*, we have followed accepted translation in using "prior-priority," whereas for *avant-premier(e)*, we have chosen "prior-to-the-first." Although this translation is a bit cumbersome, it

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nevertheless has the benefit of retaining the echo with *avant-priorité*.

Another term with a particular usage is *ressuscité*; as an adjective, as in *la victime ressuscité*; as a substantive, as in a phrase like *la futuralité des Ressuscités*; or as part of a new term, as in a phrase like *le Ressuscité-en-personne*. We have rendered it as “arisen” throughout. Thus, we have rendered the first case as “the arisen victim,” the second as “the futurity of the Arisen,” and the third as “the Arisen-in-person.” This decision is justified by the fact that the term is mutated from a Christian context, something to which the text itself attests. Rendering it as “arisen” has allowed us to capture these echoes throughout.

Several other terminological choices should be kept in mind. The English “mankind” serves throughout the text as a rendering of the French *genre humain*. This is a standard translation, but one that obscures the multiple resonances of the French term, which could also be translated as “human species,” “human genre,” or “human sort,” associations that should be kept in mind because they are reactivated in the text.

For the purpose of conceptual consistency, we have rendered the word *suffisance* throughout as “sufficiency,” but we hope the reader will keep in mind that in French the word also has a touch of arrogance to it, meaning at times self-sufficiency and even self-importance. Similarly multivalent is the French *force*, which in English could be translated as either “force” or “strength.” Instead of alternating between the two English translations, something which might mislead the reader as to the consistency of Laruelle’s vocabulary and the emphasis of his meaning (especially in chapter 3 where the word is

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particularly frequent and important), we have rendered it as “force” throughout. This is in keeping with previous translations, which have also emphasized “force.” Common practice guided us in translating *de-dernière-instance* – “of-the-last-instance.” This is the established translation, but we hope that readers will keep in mind the other French meaning of *instance*, which is “authority.” We decided to render the peculiar verb *sous-venir* as “coming-under,” but the reader should also keep in mind that it evokes the French word for memory, *souvenir*.

As is well known to readers of Deleuze and Guattari, the French term *plan* has the dual meaning of “plane” and “plan.” We have generally rendered it as “plane,” except for the few times where “plan” made more idiomatic sense in English (as for example in the reference to *le plan du salut* which we rendered as a “plan of salvation”). Throughout, *vaincu* is rendered as “defeated,” as in “the defeated” for *les vaincus*. Finally, we have decided to follow the tradition of translations of Althusser in rendering the French *conjoncture* directly as “conjuncture.” Meanwhile, we decided to render the French *dispositif* the few times it occurs in the text as “arrangement.”

Lastly, but most importantly, we would like to thank all those who encouraged and helped us to translate this text. Particular thanks are due to Daniel Hoffmann, to whose elegant French we owe any touch of class in our English translation, Catherine Talley, whose excellent advice always kept us grounded, and Rocco Gangle, for reading the nearly finished manuscript. This translation would not be possible without the support of two people in particular: Anthony Paul Smith, whose

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offhand but sincere suggestion over dinner in Liverpool that we translate *General Theory of Victims* set this whole project in motion. From the outset, Anthony's generosity and insight have proven invaluable. The second, of course, is François Laruelle himself, whose enthusiasm, encouragement, and guidance throughout the process of translation have been indispensable.

Preface

Philosophy has never been that blurry thought riddled with exceptions that it is for intellectuals successful in the media. Without being a science in the strict sense of the term, philosophy shares several of science's requirements and cannot, precisely for that reason, be content with empirical material, historical facts, narratives and images, or testimony. All of this gives too easy an idea of the concrete. In particular, a problem like that of victims is a challenge; it paradoxically demands to be given a theoretical space, a problematic sufficiently closed to limit the indetermination of utterances made, sufficiently open to permit conceptual invention. This is why the body of this research, the Introduction included, is framed by two texts. The first, "Theoretical preparation and precaution," sets the coordinates for a relatively rigorous space and the vocabulary of its object and of its method. Without making it essential reading and without saying "Let no one enter here who does not cross this portal," that is, the portal of several "non-standard" philosophical notions, it greatly facilitates

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entry into the depths of the philosophical cave containing the mass graves of victims. We will enter it armed with elementary quantum notions. The second is a “Restatement of the overall argument,” which presents the argument in a condensed form. The entirety of the argument is an ethics for the philosophers, professional or not, that we aspire to become, without knowing that we all already are philosophers spontaneously, and, from our point of view, still all too innocently.

Elements of this essay were presented as a lecture at the International College of Tunis at the invitation of Ms Hélé Beji, with an introduction by Philippe Petit.

Theoretical preparation and precaution

In order to ensure its rigor and efficacy, a general theory of victims must expunge many useful or asserted nuances and organize itself around several fundamental concepts. Moreover, it is impossible for such a theory to speak of victims “in themselves” the way common sense, the media, and thus philosophy speak of them, assuming that this object, its production, its affects, and its tasks are all well known. We do not know [*savons*] what a victim is. We know [*connaissons*] nothing of it but symptoms, and we must organize ourselves in order to produce its concept with the two means at our disposal, which enlist a philosophy we will call “non-standard.”

The problems are treated according to an orientation known as generic and a method that borrows from quantum theory or, through its extension to the problems of the human sciences, “quantum-oriented” theory. This is a somewhat novel combination and one

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that, above all, has an important displacement effect: it passes from philosophy and its morals to a formal and more elevated plane, an ethical plane centered on relations, this time between man as a generic being and all of philosophy as a purveyor of morals. The generic orientation will leave the last humanists unsatisfied because humans are here defined as Man-in-person or without humanism, only partially axiomatizable by philosophy or with its help. The second orientation will frustrate physicists, who will wonder what they have to do with and for victims. These two difficulties, “superposed” by a procedure from quantum physics, will define a non-standard theory for humans as victims and for the ethics they demand. For us, the moral and the ethical are distinguished from one another as philosophy and non-standard thought.

The generic orientation, human but not humanist or philosophical, is centered on the notions of “Man-in-person” and “Victim-in-person,” notions meant to avoid the classic definitions of man such as “rational animal,” “political animal,” “metaphysical animal,” and so on. The generic is a process of the reduction of any given philosophical or macroscopic entity, of its nature as doublet, double, or double transcendence (consciousness, ego, or a psychosociological identity). It is a reduction to a phenomenal immanence, lived but objective, subjected to the quantum principle of superposition, *which is not a principle of logical identity*. It settles case by case, which is to say once each time, the phenomena of an undulatory or vectorial order, which are linear despite their interference. Nevertheless, such phenomena, which can be added without metaphysical identity, can be paradoxically called “in-person.”

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In-person defines the One rather than Being. But which One? The One as the real, no doubt, but such a question straightaway falsifies the problem by specularly projecting the answer. One-in-One is already a more precise answer. We will say that in-person is said of the in-One no less than of the appearance of the in-One, of the unique, once-each-time face of the in-One, which has no doublet, does not look at itself in the mirror, and has only this uniface. Under these conditions, in-person always specifies the human or its extensions as generic rather than Being or being [*l'être ou l'étant*]. It results neither from an analytical inclusion nor a synthetic addition of a second term to the first. The superposition that produces it is a “specific” operation and a “specific” real, which owe nothing to logico-philosophical identity, a transcendental one for example, and concerns only what we call the One and not Being. But the in-person becomes amphibological if we relate it back to the massive, in-itself distinctions of philosophy, for example of being and appearing, or of the I and the other, of the I and the stranger. If we persist in referring the in-person back to these coordinates of philosophical space, it receives a double aspect, at once ontological and phenomenological, and thus amphibological. However, if it is said of the human real as One rather than as Being, it is also said of its appearance, except that this appearance is no longer the appearance of Being but of the One; it is the phenomenon of the Stranger, the unique face of the One-without-unity. Just as the One as radical immanence or the One-in-One is substituted for Being, a phenomenology of the One is substituted for a phenomenology of Being.

As for the quantum-oriented procedure for the

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treatment of humans, it calls on a matrix of organization through a superposition of opposing givens, dialectical or not, treated as variables, and in the end, as vectors. It indexes their products to the benchmark of an immanence structured algebraically, as quantum theory is prone to do (the imaginary or complex number). The in-person of the One or of humans is thus obtained by a method that associates a non-dialectical conjugation of opposites or philosophical planes as formalized variables – Being and Appearing, the I and the Stranger – with, on the other hand, the algebraic interpretation that transforms them into lived phenomena that are at once undulatory and particulate, which is to say, into vectors. The result is a simplification of doublets and a weakening of philosophical power.

This generic simplification or reduction is neither simply excessive, nor simply subtractive. As “imaginary” in the algebraic sense, it has something excessive in relation to the state of a given thing, but it is less excessive than the always-double philosophical transcendence. In a way, it is a withdrawal or a moderate (radical) subtraction in relation to philosophical transcending, which is absolutely excessive, to the point of reaching “platonic ravings” (Kant). It is subtraction as a solely radical excess, one that asserts the core of “weak force” of humans (and of victims), and also of the concepts dedicated to them. However, the generic and “quantum-oriented method” does not stop at this operation. Opposites (being and appearing, Being and being, nature and culture, etc.) have not vanished completely; they and their (macroscopic) relations reappear in the flowing course of superpositions, this time as phenomena no longer undulatory but particulate, or, all

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too briefly, microscopic. It is obvious that the superposition of being and appearing, or even, as we will explain, of criminal and victim, of persecutor and persecuted, strictly speaking has no empirical sense or logical identity, and must open up the way towards an admittedly “material” or lived formalism and an ethics for philosophy rather than towards the description of a state of a thing. These superpositions have no empirical sense until the opposing instances are given, recorded, and secured as distinct. And yet, they are no longer superpositions of states in the rigorous sense of the term, which only applies to undulatory phenomena. They are nothing but simple identifications, which are more or less exact collections of transcendent terms incapable of creating a true immanence. Doubtless, the criminal and the victim must have points in common that quickly become points of disjunction, like interferences and intermediary states, but they are not superposed in a quantum sense. So that they can be superposed, the “genre” of objects or of matter, the genre of reality, must be changed in order to enact less a *metabasis allo genos* than a passage to the genre of the real par excellence, which is “mankind” [*genre humain*], to which superposition applies. In shifting phases and under distinct reasons, Man-in-person is the condition under which philosophy and its ethics are placed.

Under the stratum of political, racial, catastrophic, and humanitarian determinations – everything that makes up contemporary victimology as theory of any victim whatsoever upon which the media feeds – the destiny of victims takes another form at once more complex and more intelligible than in its phenomenological and existential treatment. Engaged here under a