Intellectuals and Power
Intellectuals and Power
The Insurrection of the Victim

François Laruelle
in conversation with Philippe Petit

Translated by Anthony Paul Smith
Contents

Translator’s preface  vii
Interviewer’s preface  xvii

Prologue  1
The Name-of-Man or the Identity of the Real  28
Portrait of the Dominant Intellectual  54
The Victim and the Understanding of Crime  73
The Practice of the Determined Intellectual  113
Criminal History and the Demand for Justice  132

Index  151
This translation was completed a few weeks after the Boston Marathon bombing in April of 2013. Watching the predictable parade of the usual personalities who pass for intellectuals on the 24-hour news networks brought home and confirmed the basic thesis of Laruelle’s critique of intellectuals in this book: intellectuals, on both the right and left, do not concern themselves with victims, but only with transcendentals that are mediatized, turned into media-friendly concepts. These include classical philosophical transcendentals like justice, truth, the rights of man or human rights, fairness, justifiable violence, etc. In each case, viewers of either the American talking-head shows, whether on liberal MSNBC or conservative FOX, or British news shows like Newsnight will be familiar with the way intellectuals parade themselves before the cameras, spouting off in support of some stance based upon these transcendental abstractions. I am highlighting the transcendental nature of these abstractions precisely because Laruelle’s point is not to reject abstraction (though he prefers to
speak of them as a singularity or “one abstract”), but to reject the transcendental illusion produced by these intellectuals before the cameras or on the op-ed pages of your daily newspaper. What Laruelle offers his readers here is a vision of intellectuals’ role in the light of the critical and constructive project of non-philosophy. One that seeks to escape from the inanities of the so-called “intellectuals” whose very subsistence is guaranteed by their taking some stand on any issue whatsoever – and taking that stand on deadline! – into a higher form of thinking, one that is ultimately human and thinks from the victim rather than according to these transcendental abstractions.

In this introduction I will not detail the various hypotheses – as Laruelle describes his reflections here – that he puts forward in the course of this conversation with Philippe Petit. Petit’s “Interviewer’s Preface” already sets up and offers a summary of the conversation that follows. This preface will be limited to introducing Petit and highlighting how this book, originally published in France in 2003, fits within the wider project of Laruelle’s non-philosophy.

Conducting the interview, as already mentioned, is Philippe Petit, who also is the general editor for the series Conversations pour demain [Conversations for Tomorrow] in which L’ultime honneur des intellectuels [translated here as Intellectuals and Power] originally appeared. This series of books consists of interviews with important public intellectuals in France including thinkers who may be familiar to Anglophone readers, like Paul Virilio and Julia Kristeva. Bringing philosophers into conversation is a certain passion of Petit as this interview with Laruelle sits among Petit’s other
Translator’s preface

book-length interviews with Bernard Stiegler and Jean Baudrillard.¹ In these interviews Petit brings his training as a journalist together with his training in philosophy, in which he holds the French equivalent of a doctorate. The reader will see this on display as Petit challenges Laruelle to clarify his own non-philosophical concepts in the light of other philosophers’ ideas, and as he challenges Laruelle to make those concepts speak in the light of current events.

Intellectuals and Power follows on from themes begun in Laruelle’s Ethique de l’Étranger (2000) and his Future Christ: A Lesson in Heresy (2002/2010). Both of these texts touch on major issues in philosophical ethics, namely the lived reality of victims of crimes against humanity, the historical instance of the Shoah, as well as the problems of memory inherent in these sorts of massively destructive events. However, it is here in Intellectuals and Power that the problematic of victims emerges for the first time in Laruelle’s work. This is given its most sustained treatment in his General Theory of Victims, forthcoming with Polity in a translation by Jessie Hock and Alex Dubilet (original French edition published in 2012). But it is here that the theme of victims emerges in explicit reference to those who claim to be able to speak for them – the intellectuals – and whose failure to truly think from the victim, rather than simply about her, is revealed by Laruelle.

Non-Philosophy has always been concerned with the ethical and the political, with Laruelle’s earliest works

Translator’s preface

(all of which remain untranslated at the time of this publication) explicitly developing concepts related to the political thematics of revolution, power, and the status of minorities. However, there is a marked difference between Laruelle’s engagement with ethics and politics and those of his contemporary Alain Badiou, who is a constant reference point in this interview. That difference is simply that Laruelle refuses to separate ethics and politics as Badiou insists upon doing. Laruelle discusses this difference here, but it reaches its fullest expression in his Anti-Badiou (translated into English by Robin Mackey for Bloomsbury). What Laruelle objects to in this separation is the way it serves to underline the supremacy of philosophy over the human, of saying that, in some sense, one should subject oneself to the master of politics instead of the master of ethics. For Laruelle, neither ethics nor politics should master the human, but rather both are simply material or tools for the human to use in the construction of a truly human or humane utopia. Thus his concern with politics has always sought to avoid the usual form of politics, always determined by whether it fits into a media-friendly narrative or already-existing politics which are recognizably liberal, leftist, or right-wing. While Laruelle is clearly aligned on the Left of the political spectrum, as can be seen in his emphasis on Marxism and a recognition that human beings require to have their means of subsistence safeguarded regardless of anything else, he is not satisfied with the scripted dialog of politics.

However, breaking that scripted dialog by demanding that intellectuals, philosophers, and theorists of all kinds turn to the victim is not some fetishization of victims that would turn them into a transcendent term
that stops all conversation. But it is a recognition that these intellectuals and philosophy almost always turn away from the victim. The victim-in-person, as Laruelle calls her to highlight her real character, her lived or flesh-and-blood character, does not inspire philosophers and intellectuals in the same way that heroes, or brave resisters, or those who turn the tide and heroically vanquish their enemies, do. So, the victim becomes the unthought of philosophy, a stumbling block to its standard practice. She must then become a presupposed for any attempt to think ethics and politics anew, in defense of the human.

There are a number of choices I have made in the course of translating this text that should be highlighted here so that the reader can keep them in mind. In general, there are inherent difficulties in translating Laruelle’s work that go to the heart of his theoretical practice. Laruelle has highlighted in many of his publications the importance of non-philosophical syntax in combating the standard syntax of philosophy. This means that the way he writes in French is often experimental, with a certain disregard for ease of reading. In order to capture this syntax, I always tend toward a more literal translation of his works. At times I have aimed for a freer translation, but in general I prefer the way in which a literal translation causes the reader to slow down in the same way a reader is suddenly slowed by Laruelle’s French prose.

Throughout his work Laruelle uses the past participle of verbs in a technical way. For example, vécu is the past participle of vivre, meaning to live, but is normally translated in philosophical texts as “lived experience.”
As the meaning of Laruelle’s usage is to highlight the actual, radically immanent sense of some action, then translating it in this way, though in some sense more idiomatic, would cover over that technical meaning as it suggests a distance between what is lived and the experience of it. Distance for Laruelle is always the expression of some form of transcendence and so would be contrary to the intended meaning. In those cases where the usage struck me as important, I have translated *vécu* as “lived.”

Along the same lines of attempting to express something as radical immanence, Laruelle explicitly distinguishes between *un présupposé*, which could be translated as “presupposition” for a more idiomatic rendering, and *présupposition philosophique* or “philosophical presupposition.” I have rendered *un présupposé* as “a presupposed” / “one presupposed” to highlight this difference. The same follows when Laruelle distinguishes between “an abstract” / “one abstract” and an abstraction.

Laruelle often uses formulations such as the prefix “auto,” i.e. “auto-affection.” Often, these uses of “auto” could be translated as “self” as in “self-defense.” However, after a discussion with the author, I have rendered many of these using “auto” to highlight the particular character of radical immanence that Laruelle wants to emphasize and to avoid the potentially confusing philosophical baggage of the “self” implied in the usual formulations. In this way, I have followed the translators of Michel Henry’s work, which also serves to highlight the great influence Henry’s work has had on Laruelle.

*Médiatique* is another major adjectival term that
Translator’s preface

recurs throughout the text but resists easy translation. In general the term is used in the text to refer to ideas or figures that we might call “camera-ready” or “media-friendly.” That is, they can fit into already-constructed media narratives or are suitable for easy consumption by being translated into sound bites. Sometimes in the text such a translation did not seem to fit and so I have sometimes rendered it with the neologism “mediatized” to suggest the rendering of the noun into something media-friendly or amenable to being expressed through media.

Laruelle uses terminology in the book that has been introduced in earlier works of his and so does not attempt to explain them for the reader. Chief among them is his use of “Man-in-person” or his strange use of brackets and hyphens. In general these formulations are not as mystifying as readers may first assume. For example, “Man-in-person” and variants of this phrase refer to the usual sense of “in person” we also have in English, where someone is there in all actuality. The sense Laruelle is putting across here is that there is no separation between the idea and the concrete reality, as there exists in abstractions concerning what a human being is – like “a political animal” and so on. I direct readers to the translators’ prefaces of Future Christ and Principles of Non-Philosophy for further explications of this vocabulary and syntax, as well as to A. P. Smith, Laruelle: A Stranger Thought (Polity, forthcoming).

Laruelle’s use of “Man” throughout the text always refers to the generic-being or species-being of human beings. Of course this opens up Laruelle to charges that his non-philosophy is, like that of the majority of philosophers, a male-oriented philosophy. In works that
Translator’s preface

have followed *Intellectuals and Power*, Laruelle has attempted to correct this by referring to the “Human-in-person” precisely because he is trying to think the human in his or her radical immanence and so beyond sexual difference, but without slipping into the usual mistake of confusing a particular (a biological male human being) with the universal. In attempting to highlight this later attempt without overstepping my rights as a translator, I have availed myself of an opportunity coded into the gendered nature of French as a Romance language. As readers likely know, all nouns and their adjectives are either masculine or feminine. Thus, “intellectual” in French is masculine and “victim” is feminine. I have then referred to intellectuals with the general pronoun “he” (though this does not of course mean that there are no women intellectuals), and victims with the pronoun “she” (though this does not mean that there are no men who are victims). This aligning of women and victims is not meant to suggest a weakness on the part of women, especially since Laruelle’s point that philosophers have never really dealt with the victim in some ways parallels Irigaray when she says that philosophy has not truly thought from the perspective of a woman.²

Finally, Laruelle marks a difference between what he terms dominant intellectuals, who carry various adjectives like engaged, humanitarian, right-wing, left-wing, etc., and what he terms the determined intellectual. A

² Those interested in a discussion of how Laruelle’s non-philosophy may interact with gender theory and feminist philosophy should look to Katerina Kolozova’s *Cut of the Real: Subjectivity and Poststructuralist Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), as well as the preface to Kolozova’s book written by Laruelle.
reader going too quickly might confuse this with an intellectual who is particularly dedicated to some task, but the adjective expresses a theoretical point Laruelle is making. The determined intellectual is an intellectual whose character is determined in the sense of conditioned or driven by his or her relationship to the victim. Laruelle’s understanding of determination owes much to his study of Marx, who in turn was influenced in his thinking by Hegel, and so readers should bear in mind the Hegelian meaning of “determined” as found in the master–slave dialectic when coming across this term.
Interviewer’s preface

An inflexible rigor and a certain easing of the conditions of thought: the double injunction animating the work of François Laruelle will surprise more than one reader. Attracted by the title, *Intellectuals and Power*, intrigued by the back cover, the neophyte, in total innocence, will get to know the author of *Une biographie de l’homme ordinaire* (1985) and *Future Christ: A Lesson in Heresy* (2002 and 2010 in English translation). In doing so, the reader may be surprised by the theoretical audacity of someone who began his career right off the bat as a heretic nearly 20 years ago, composing little blue notebooks that were stapled together with care, overseeing their selling and distribution himself.

This reader will be surprised by the relentless dialogue – maybe puzzled, or even annoyed, by it – but he doesn’t know how lucky he is. Whether he resists agreeing to the author’s “spiritual” thought, to his “unlearned” (and untaught) knowing; whether he lets himself be taken by his affirmation of a radical humanity, one that is primitive as much as future; whether he adheres or not