

Going Beyond the “Long Shadow” of 1915: Armenians in 2115

(Some thoughts on developing a research agenda)

Razmik Panossian

Director, Armenian Communities Department, Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, Lisbon

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Abstract

It is often said that nationalism is Janus-faced (Nairn). One face looks back, while the other looks ahead. Has the Genocide blinded one of the faces of the Armenian Janus, whereby Armenian nationalism (and more broadly identity construction) has lost the ability to look ahead? This presentation will step out of the “comfort zone” of analysing the past and look ahead. While glancing over the shoulder backwards, the paper will look ahead into the future and venture some “guesses” – based on trends – of where Armenians are going as a people, considering both Armenia and the diaspora, as well as the relationship between them. Of course, no one can forecast a century into the future, as the title of the presentation implies. But “Armenians in 2115” is a powerful metaphor to encourage academics and policy makers to think ahead, perhaps 20, 30 or 40 years down the road. This presentation is an invitation to do that. What would a future-oriented research agenda look like in Armenian studies? What are the key research areas that should be strengthened? A century after 1915, should we re-evaluate what we research in Genocide Studies? The second part of the paper will address these set of questions, linking global trends affecting Armenians to research needs. Of course, the goal of academic research is not to serve the nation or the community, but it ought to be broadly in line with relevant issues. Janus’s success lies in knowing what these issues are.

Note: the verbal presentation delivered was slightly shorter as some passages were omitted due to time constraints.

Going Beyond the “Long Shadow” of 1915: Armenians in 2115

Introduction

Thank you to Professor Sebouh Aslanian and UCLA for the invitation to speak here, and the very warm welcome. But, I must confess that I am somewhat nervous about this presentation. I have an uneasy feeling that I do not *really* belong here. Not because I am a disciplinary hybrid: a mix of history and political science, with a dash of anthropology and cultural studies..., but because what I am about to say might not really fit in the tempo of this conference.

For one, I am a “lapsed” academic. I no longer “do” research, but I fund research, particularly Armenian studies. Currently, liberated from the restraints of academia – freed from footnotes, so to speak – I work in a foundation that granted 1.1 million USD in scholarships to Armenian and Armenian studies students globally in 2014. This gives me the 30,000 feet view of where things are in the Armenian academic world. It also gives me, for good or bad, a certain degree of influence to direct research – i.e. to put funds where we think Armenian studies should go. It is not an easy task. It necessitates looking ahead, it necessitates strategic thinking as well as value judgement, and it entails responsibility.

The second reason for my unease is that I am actually not going to talk about the Genocide, or even the past for that matter. Rather, I am going to talk about the present and the future. Historians and social scientists do not like to do this because it entails delving into the “dark sciences” of prediction, and has a high probability of being proven wrong. Talking about the future is not fact based, but it should be – as I will argue – research based.

So, what am I doing, agreeing to be the last speaker at an academic conference on the Armenian Genocide? I hope you will not think that I am abusing the podium when I glance backwards over my shoulder only occasionally during the next 20 minutes, while I keep my gaze firmly toward the future and venture some suggestions for areas of research in line with where Armenians are going as a people. Put differently, I will be speaking of trends and the research that needs to be done to understand and *influence* these trends.

(I should add that I am quite aware of the never ending “debate” whether academic research should be undertaken for the sake of research and knowledge or with the view of influencing policy and decisions – i.e. being “instrumentalised.” I do not wish to get into this argument here. Suffice it to say that what I will talk about is *open-ended* policy-

relevant research which universities can and do spearhead, including historians. Policy-relevant research should not be confounded with commissioned “research” that is meant to prove an already given conclusion or feed into the ideological preferences of funders. This is an important point. Some academics will say I am being too “directional,” that a research funder should just support excellent research, irrespective of consequences or “end use.” I disagree. Research has never been “neutral” – from Khorenatsi to Chamchian, from the ideologically driven Soviet historians to the hegemonically driven Western liberal intellectuals. There is always a value laden subtext to research, sometimes it is stated explicitly, but more often it is implicit. In my view, funders should not interfere with the approach or methodology of research, giving researchers complete freedom, but can provide guidance regarding research topics.)

Of course, my title, “Armenians in 2115,” is a bit of a metaphor. We do not know if the world will survive into 2115, let alone Armenians, but I think the point is clear: let us look ahead, well ahead into the future – 20, 30, 40 years down the road. I should also mention that the “Armenians in 2115” moniker is an offshoot of a strategy seminar we had organised in Lisbon several months ago for the Armenian global leadership, and some ideas here are probably influenced by that discussion.

A very incomplete snapshot of Armenian studies in 2014

Let me start with a bit of a snapshot of Armenian studies in 2014. This is a very incomplete analysis, a bit like an election poll, indicative of the lay of the land, but not quite the most accurate result. I will draw on the topics of two Armenian studies conferences the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation supported, and our own scholarship programme. One could also look at the research topics of Armenian studies chairs and their graduate students, which I have not.

The conference of the mostly-Europe based International Association for Armenian Studies (AIEA), held in Yerevan in October 2014, had 69 papers in its programme. A rough count indicates that of the 69, 6 or 7 pertained to the post-Genocide period. Most presentations were on ancient history and literature (including linguistics).

A few days prior to that conference, the mostly US-based Society for Armenian Studies (SAS) held its own conference/workshop in Yerevan (we were more involved with this event, and strongly encouraged a focus on contemporary issues, which the organisers tried to incorporate). Of the 42 papers listed in the programme, over half, 24, were on the pre-1923 period, including at least 7 on different elements of the Genocide. 11 were on the “short 20th Century,” 1920s to 80s (Hobsbawm), including 8 or so on literature. There were 7 papers out of the 42 on the post-independence contemporary period.

The conference call for papers included 7 thematic areas. This is the breakdown per area of the actual presentations given (the numbers add to 34 as some speakers pulled out at the last minute):

1. Inadequately studied periods in Armenian history – 1080 to 1828: 10 papers.
2. Impact of the Armenian Genocide on arts and culture: 7 papers.
3. Testimonies of survivors: 1 paper.
4. Armenian historiography in the past 30 years: 0 papers.
5. Armenian literary studies in the past 30 years: 8 papers.
6. Armenian diaspora in the 21st Century: 8 papers.
7. Digitisation and the future of Armenian studies: 0 papers (is Armenian studies not interested in the future?)

Finally, just to mention, I understand that the Armenian panels at the MESA conference in November in Washington DC were about Armenians in the Ottoman Empire, i.e. the Genocide and the pre-Genocide period.

We do love our history! It is another question if we learn from it.... But let us not get into that!

In our own funding decisions, which are predominantly based on the quality of applications, but where we have explicitly said that we will privilege the contemporary period – so the results are somewhat skewed in favour of the 20th and 21st centuries – the picture looks like this: of the 14 new research scholarships we granted in Armenian studies (4 MA, 8 PhD, 2 post-doc), 8 were on the pre-1923 period, 1 was on the 20th Century, and 5 were on the post-1988 period. Of these, one was really relevant to contemporary Armenia.

Of the 13 renewals in 2014, 5 were on the pre-1923 period or philology, 4 were on the 20th Century (including the memory of the Genocide and literature), 2 were on the post-1988 period, and 2 on current problems pertaining to the Armenian language in the diaspora.

Of the 27 in total, that gives us 13 scholarships on the pre-1923 period, 5 on the 20th Century and 9 on current issues. With a handful of exceptions, none addressed the burning issues facing Armenians *today*.

These figures exclude the short term travel grants in Armenian studies, the travel scholarships we give to students and researchers in Armenia, as well as the two fellowships we granted to study the Armenian presence in China.

Again, I should emphasise, this is not a complete picture of Armenian studies – and I hope somebody does do the research to provide a more complete analysis – but it does give us an indication of where Armenian studies research is currently at: history and genocide.

Trends, crystal balls and what needs to be researched

Let me now turn to the problems Armenia and Armenians face in the 21st Century. I do not have the time to explore any of the problems in depth. I divide the issues – and this is not an exhaustive list by any means – into three categories: Armenia, the diaspora and Turkey (including the Genocide). I will make no more than two or three points on each.

Armenia

The fertility rate in industrialised countries for the population to remain constant is 2.1 children per woman. It is higher in developing countries, given the higher mortality rates. In Armenia the fertility rate is 1.6. Compounded with the emigration issue – i.e. the country losing tens of thousands of people per year (at least 30,000 annually) – and no significant immigration except the recent surge due to the war in Syria, you can easily see that in several decades Armenia will cease to be a significant population centre.

Let me ask you, where is the research within Armenian studies to deal with this reality? Where are the development studies experts, the demographers? This is not a genocide per se, but the outcome of this trend is going to be the same as a genocide, but in a much slower motion: the depopulation of Armenia – i.e. *of* Armenians. I am not a demographer, but if we do a rough math based on current trends, are we looking at a population of roughly one million in Armenia by the time we commemorate the 125th anniversary of the Genocide? Think of the implications of this, be it economic, political or military.

The oligarchic economic system of the country, fostered by a matching political system, and coupled with closed borders, has laid the foundations of an unsustainable model in terms of long term development. Beyond the politicised debates and partisan policy papers, we need real evidence-based research by economists to highlight the problems and offer alternative models. And yet, as far as I know, very little is forthcoming.

The story is not too different in the fields of political science, international relations and sister disciplines. The entire Middle East is changing, new political entities are emerging next to Armenia – from Kurdistan to ISIL – and yet Armenian academic research, particularly in the diaspora, is largely absent from it all.

Let me ask again, where are the contemporary historians, political scientists, the sociologists and the economists within the ranks of Armenian studies? Where are the major academic works on these subjects that could influence policies to turn around bleak trends into positive developments? (Of course, producing research is not enough; it needs to be disseminated and used by decision makers. This is a whole different topic which I cannot cover here).

Diaspora

Let me turn to the diaspora(s), and mention just three lacunae among many. First, we make lots of assumptions about the current thinking and issues in the diaspora, be it the established diaspora or the newly emerged post-Soviet communities: from the actual numbers – the politically expedient but utterly exaggerated fantasy figure of a diaspora of 10 million Armenians – to attitudes toward the Genocide. But the fact of the matter is that we simply do not know what diasporans think about various matters, how they relate to Armenianness, to what degree they engage with Armenian issues or with host society issues, what they really think of the politics of Genocide recognition, etc., etc. There has been no systematic study of diasporan public opinion and attitudes. We need one!

Let me take the Genocide recognition point a bit further. We *assume* that it is at the core of diasporan identity, and based on this assumption Armenian diasporan politics generally tends to be single issue advocacy. What if we realise, after some survey-based research, that it is not, and that younger Armenians have many other issues they want to engage with. You can see the destabilising nature of such research, the uncomfortable facts it might unearth, particularly for the institutional leadership of the diaspora. But it would be research that would lead to better policies of engagement with younger generations, and perhaps different ways of commemorating the Genocide.

(Allow me to go on a brief tangent here. As I look around the different memorial events this April, I am realising that the commemoration of the darkest chapter of Armenian history is becoming almost like a festival, even a celebration – with the occasionally linguistic slippage between “commemoration” and “celebration.” I am reminded of Levon Aprahamian’s important anthropological work two decades ago on the Gharabagh movement in Armenian as being a “festival” in the square. Is the “festivalisation” of the Genocide inevitable? – which might be a reflection of the change of mentality from a “victim” nation to a “victorious” or “successful” nation. My generation is the last that heard genocide stories directly from grandparents. Without this direct connection to the trauma suffered, will the nature of the commemorations change too?)

The second lacuna in terms of research pertains to the advancement of the Armenian language in the diaspora, particularly Western Armenian. Pedagogical innovation, modern teacher preparation, new technologies and language learning are sorely needed research domains in which Armenians are lagging behind. More broadly, what can Armenians learn from the experience of others in language revitalisation, especially in a diasporan (non-state based) context?

Finally, I should mention the near total absence of research, particularly in the Western-based Armenian studies, of the newly emerged (i.e. post-Soviet) diasporan communities in Russia, Europe and elsewhere. There is some journalist work, but very few serious academic studies in mainstream languages. And yet, numerically these communities are larger than the post-Genocide diaspora. Is the Genocide as important to them as it is to Armenians who are descendants from the Ottoman Empire? Indeed, is community organisation as important to them as it was to the 1920s generation?

Turkey

Researching Turkey is the last set of issues I would like to mention. It is a country that is going through some profound changes, some of it positive, some not so. On the one hand, it is opening up on Armenian-related issues, and on the other it is retracting (above all at the level of government). Armenians need to make sense of that country. And yet, outside of the Genocide paradigm and Genocide related research, Armenians know very little about Turkey, particularly its domestic issues, its civil society, academic debates and politics.

Turkish-speaking and Armenian-speaking political scientists, sociologists, anthropologies, contemporary historians and translators are needed, who are *not* necessarily genocide scholars. As the state in which Armenian ancestral lands are located, there is much more to learn about the country as it *currently* functions – not as it functioned in 1915, 1955 or 1985. This is probably the most controversial thing I am saying, as it can be downright “subversive” of prevalent attitudes, of the hardened positions and polarisation.

The answer to the question “how should Armenians engage with Turkey” needs to be research based. Research that would have to be taken under the shadow of the Genocide, no doubt, but *beyond* the paradigm of the Genocide and its acceptance. The guidance of academics in various fields is particularly important in this respect.

Lest I be misunderstood, this is not a call to engage with denialists, but it is a call to ask *additional* research questions besides the Genocide and its recognition.

The research questions that need to be asked range from Armenian heritage preservation to business interactions, from civil society engagement to public education. And of course, there is the very large issue of reparations, on which there is, thankfully, some current research.

Finally, if Turkey further democratises, and Istanbul once again emerges as a global centre of Armenian learning and culture, how will Armenian studies engage with such a centre? Let me end this section with that teasing question.

The gap and its reasons

Having laid out in the first part what is Armenian studies generally preoccupied with (history and Genocide), and in the second section some vital questions on which we need guidance from the academic community, it seems to me – again from the 30,000 feet perspective (and as someone who has straddled both the academic and policy/funding worlds) – that there is mismatch between what is being researched and where Armenians are heading as a people.

Why is this? Let me mention five quick points:

1. The long shadow of the Genocide and Turkish denial of it. This has led to the urge “to prove,” and to shout that “we are here!”
2. A profound conservatism among the diaspora leadership that is fearful of controversial topics and inconvenient truths. I am glad to say that some diaspora organisations are engaged with strategic forecasting, but it is not enough (one of the key points that emerged out of our own “Armenians in 2115” seminar was the need to undertake more research on contemporary issues to help decision makers).
3. The lack of a culture of fact-based public debates. Hence disagreements quickly degenerate into accusations of being an “agent,” a “traitor,” or “anti-Armenian.”
4. The deep divide between diaspora- and Armenia-based academics in their approaches and methodologies, which often translates into distrust.
5. The lack of an academic institutional framework within Armenian studies, broadly understood, that is genuinely interested in contemporary issue and policy-relevant research.

It would take another lecture or two to flesh out each of these points.

Faced with these daunting challenges, we retreat into the glorification of our history, and in our collective agony. The heavy weight of history (and of historians!) enhances the face of Janus that looks back, and limits the vision of the forward looking face.

Conclusion

As I re-read my presentation before writing the conclusion, I realised that it might sound like an indictment of Armenian studies and of historians. It is not. Nonetheless, some of you might say that this conference, on the history of the Genocide, is not the appropriate place for this discussion. I think it is. Historians can be, after all, public intellectuals who transmit the lessons of the past to shape the present and the future. Some in this room do engage in such issues.

Obviously, I am not saying that history is not important and that we should turn our backs to it, particularly modern history (and I hope I do not get misquoted as saying that). And I am certainly not saying that researching the Genocide is not important. What I am suggesting is to balance our talk of 1915 with that of 2115, to study history, but also to analyse strategy.

I grew up with stories of the Genocide. My paternal grandmother and maternal grandfather, both survivors of Der Zor, had the same message to us, the grandchildren: do not forget what the Turks have done to us, and get an education to build a future. It was always a dual message. The subtext was clear – your success is going to overcome the destruction of the Genocide. We must take that message of perseverance and of building to the collective level.

We have marched through the past for a century, and we have done so relatively successfully. Building on that we must now face a march through the future. Except we do not know the terrain around us and how it will enable or impede this march – and we need to know. I will repeat again, let us balance our gaze between the past and the future. A people that is not at least half-oriented towards the future, creating new culture and identities along the way, and basing its collective decisions on research rather than assumptions, will eventually wither away. And none of us wants that.

My call today is to historians and more broadly to the Armenian studies academic community, to pay more attention to, and put more resources into, future oriented research that deals with *current* problems – to foster a research-based debate about where Armenia and Armenians are going. In my view, the 100th anniversary of the Genocide should mark the beginning of a collective discussion about the *next* century.