

Some Theoretical Thoughts on the Obstacles to Armenian-Turkish Reconciliation

I should like to discuss three ideas on the subject of obstacles to Armenian-Turkish reconciliation, and make some remarks on the possibility of reconciliation between the Turkish and Armenian communities. The first point is thinking in collective categories. The second is the relationship between past and present or the problem of defining collective identity over time. The third point is related to the stereotyping and dehumanizing of group by the other. I will try to show how all these points impede or distort Armenian-Turkish relations.

First, a general observation. Most people who are familiar with the Armenian Genocide issue believe that the real problem lies in the disagreement over historical events, yet this is true only to a limited extent. If the issue were only a dispute about history, then we could easily verify the facts through available information in terms of official and non-official documents. What needs to be done is very straightforward: we need to create a historical or truth commission to review these documents; we need to make these documents available to everyone; and, we need to have an open and serious discussion especially in Turkey about their contents.

That such attempts have never been made (especially in Turkey) suggests that there are problems other than simple disagreement over historical events. We can surmise that these problems lie not in the actual historical occurrences but in the current relationship between the Turks and the Armenians. In other words, their current perception of each other seems more important than the past itself. However, I make no judgment here as to the origins or validity of these perceptions. My point is that Armenians and Turks have developed a certain discourse, that is, separate narratives about the past which are an important part of each collective group identity and used only to reinforce existing national stereotypes. In this way, the perception of each party of itself and others, quite apart from the historical debate, becomes an obstacle to common understanding. The main reasons for such an attitude lie in how the parties think about the relationship between past and present, construct the "Self" and "Other," as well as on the relationship between the "Self" and "Other."

In order to disentangle and to clarify this complex issue, I suggest that we need to make a clear distinction between the actual problem and the manner in which the problem is handled. I will try to show apart from the history how our current perception of each other, the language that we use, in short our current relations, create additional problems and exacerbate the conflict itself.

But in order to do that we have to change our paradigm within which we have tried to understand the Armenian-Turkish Conflict. Until now, the Turkish-Armenian problem has been perceived within the old paradigm which produced these conflicts, namely, the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the clash of different ethnic or national groups. These conflicts can be blamed on the desire of each ethnic or national group to define its territories and determine its own boundaries, which resulted in ethnic cleansing within these boundaries. My suggestion is that a new conceptualization is necessary, and that the conflict should be placed within the new paradigm of transitional justice, as a part of the democratization effort within the existing nation-states. The conflict should not be regarded as merely a dispute between two parties over territories and boundaries, but rather as a human rights issue within and between both societies as a part of their democratization.

This means Turkey and Armenia, as neighboring states, which are both in a transitional process, should approach the conflict as a part of their transition to democracy: Turkey in its admission process to the European Union, and Armenia in its new reality as an independent state after separation from the USSR. Both nations should

deal with their pasts as a part of their democratization process and try to redefine themselves and their perception of the other's identity. To succeed at this, each needs to redefine the other in terms of the present, rather than the past. For this to occur, however, both societies must come into interaction with each other, making a clear distinction between the present and past, and not be imprisoned by the past.

The first step that we have to make is to examine our language that we use to define the conflict. The debates are often presented in terms of what the "Turkish" or "Armenian" side thinks, says, and/or acts out. Who is this "Turk" or "Armenian?" Actually, at first glance, we can surmise what these terms imply. Regarding the "Turks" we can say that there is a certain policy which is determined to deny the historical events and we define the agent of this policy as the "Turk." As far as the term "Armenian" is concerned, it is also an abstract term that characterizes the group of people who claim that what happened in 1915 was genocide. Both terms are the abstract symbols for certain policies. However, if we closely analyze these categories as social actors, we would quickly realize that these terms "Turk" and "Armenian" are an a-historical generalization; not so much a definition but a construction. As such, one can easily substitute the terms "Turk" and "Armenian" for any characteristic of what comprises the "Other." So rather than a historically defined category, we have empty constructions. Hence, the Turk is what the Armenian is not and an Armenian is what the Turk is not.

The basic reason for thinking in these collective categories is that current Turkish-Armenian relations can be characterized as glossing over every difference between the past, present and future, resulting in a sense of timelessness. As Tina Rosenberg has observed about Eastern Europe, "The first lesson I learned was that many countries are not dealing with the past, because the past is still with them."¹ Similarly, the current Turkish-Armenian relations are plagued by the continuing presence of the past and, thus, the "sameness" of the actors in their behavior, mutual relations, and perspectives. Today's actors, standing behind the historical figures of their ancestry, continue to behave toward one another as their predecessors did.

As a result, today the Turkish and Armenian peoples have become abstractions to one another, a-historical generalizations; not so much a definition as a construction. As such, one can easily substitute the terms "Turk" and "Armenian" for any characteristic of what comprises the "other." Rather than a historically defined category, we have empty constructions. Hence, a Turk is what the Armenian is not, and an Armenian is what the Turk is not. What can be done to breathe life into these clay figures and transform abstractions into flesh and blood?

We can argue that, in relations between the communities, how we define collective identities over time creates certain problems. In dealing with the Armenian Genocide, we connect the existing collectivities to past ones that either committed wrongs or were victimized. We create a "pastness," a temporal bridge between past and present.²

In order to do this we imagine two levels. First we identify two collective groups as perpetrator and victim in the past. Second, we construct two groups that meet each other in the present as representatives of that past. For this process to be credible, we must tacitly assume that collective identity remains stable over time. Between the past harm and the present atonement, we establish a fictive genealogy from the original perpetrator and victim to their representatives today. In constructing these lineages, we create a sense of "sameness" between present-day collectives and their counterparts in the past.

I would argue that in current Turkish-Armenian relations the perception of

¹ Quoted in Martha Minow, *Between Vengeance and Forgiveness*, (Boston: Beacon Press 1998), p. 120.

² My arguments here are based on some points raised by Michel-Rolph Trouillot, "Abortive Rituals, Historical Apologies in the Global Era," *Interventions* 2, no 2 (2000): 171-186.

"sameness" of the present actors (Turks and Armenians) with the past determines in large part how the actors behave toward each other. I have to add that I am not discussing the problem of continuity in terms of institutions or political responsibilities; I am discussing the issue only in terms of construction of collective identities and the perceptions of these identities. A Turk and an Armenian living today generally tend to speak to each other in terms of their history. In other words both are incapable of viewing each other on their own personal terms in the present. The question is to what extent can we identify past perpetrator and current collective as "the same"?

Equating the past and the present is not the only problem. Beyond treating nations or ethnic groups as static entities, we also perceive collective groups as if they are individuals. Because identifying a past perpetrator with a present group becomes increasingly difficult as time passes, we individualize the collectives. That means we ascribe personality to the collective. But this "collective" individual should be a particular model of individual that transcends constraints of time. It is an abstract, ahistorical individual. We attribute some characteristic to the collective that we actually attribute to the individual, such as shame, honor, guilt, dignity, pride etc. So we establish groundwork for our expectation from the collectives that are in interaction with each other.

In this way of thinking, we gloss over differences between "I and We" in the present as well as in the past. At the same time we disregard the differences between past actors and their present representatives. Individuals, collectives, past and present are all collapsed together.

One interesting result of this way of thinking reflects itself in the "accusation" and "guilt" problem. I would like to give some examples of how this way of thinking is a big obstacle in today's Turkish-Armenian relations. Atom Egoyan's 2000 film, "Ararat," was strongly criticized in Turkey as being full of violence even if the violent scenes take up very little of the general flow of the movie. This critique indicates a major psychological problem within the Turkish community. I think the real reason why the violent scenes are perceived as so prevalent in the film, and why many Turks feel offended is because they view these scenes as directed towards them personally. A friend of mine, whom I consider liberal minded, wrote me the following after viewing the film with an Armenian friend.

I was very upset by the content of the film. It had me up all night. After seeing the film...we joined some Armenian friends for drinks. For the first time that I can remember I didn't even enjoy drinking Ouzo. After a film like this, I don't care what your thoughts are, being introduced as a Turk is not easy

After seeing the film, my friend felt that it was not the historical actors involved but rather *he* that was being accused of the cruel acts depicted. I know that generally in Turkey, this is how "genocide accusations" are perceived. The present generation, perceiving itself accused of murder, has reverted to a position of psychological self-defense and has attempted to distance itself from such accusations.

This moral issue makes sense only if we create "sameness" between past and present and imagine the collective as an ahistorical entity with individual characteristics. This just goes to show how little psychological distance there is between the past and present. For people in Turkey to so personally identify with the perpetrators of the Genocide in the film is an indication of where the problem lies. It is the problem of glossing over the differences between individuals and collectives, of sameness, and of equating past and present.

So my suggestion is we have to develop a language that makes this difference clearer. We must try to develop a discourse that regards past and present as different entities. Without distinguishing between our past and present the way of communication

will remain an obstacle. In order to overcome this impediment, Turks and Armenians should stop hiding behind historical actors when speaking to each other. It is current day Turks and Armenians speaking to each other, not their ancestors. It is to their present selves that they should address each other. Doing so would definitely promote better understanding between the two communities.

Second obstacle is related with the constructing the "Other".

In constructing the "Other" as an ahistorical, abstract entity, each side has developed a very negative picture of the other, to which they constantly refer. There is a simple mechanism for constructing collective identities. In order to define ourselves mostly in positive terms, we define the other as our opposite. We are wiser, fairer, kinder, more capable, more attractive, and generally better than the other party. The "other side" is deceitful, aggressive, heartless and incapable of change for the better. Such labels as "barbaric Turks" or "Armenian traitors" are frequent and unequivocal. Military terminology is also employed. Some Armenians speak of a "war" with the "Turks." It is the same in the "enemy camp", Turkish columnists, such as Giindiiz Aktan (a former ambassador to the UN and member of the Turkish-Armenian Reconciliation Committee) write of "psychological war" and develop strategies for conducting it.

There are, of course, many reasons for constructing monolithic, stereotypical images of the other side. Social-psychology offers us a general explanation for this attitude: development of the sense of self is strongly related to its separation from the identity of others for its protection and regulation.³ "People use and 'need' enemies as external stabilizers of their sense of identity and inner control"⁴

Beyond this general theory, we can give some particular explanations for the Armenian-Turkish case. One very important and obvious one is the denial policy of the Turkish state. Furthermore, some parties may have a vested interest in perpetuating rather than resolving the problem. In particular, nationalistic circles in both camps have formed their narratives and identities in opposition to an imagined enemy. In fact, Turkish ruling elites employ an anti-Armenian attitude to rally the Turkish public around a common national identity. If Turkey were to alter its official stand on the Genocide, its entire national history would have to be rewritten. As for some of the Armenian circles, they too benefit from the existence of an image of the Turk as barbaric and savage; they use these images to explain the Genocide as a natural outcome of the Turkish character.

In general, dehumanized images of the other side are deeply rooted in the mentality of opposing ethnic or religious groups. In addition, all parties, especially in a conflict, have a differentiated view of themselves while maintaining an undifferentiated, stereotypical view of the other. Dehumanization or stereotyping may be viewed as a defensive maneuver against painful or unacceptable inner emotional positions. Perhaps the easiest way for us to deal psychologically with the cruel attacks of another is to attribute an evil and subhuman nature to that other.⁵ Such deeply ingrained belief systems are extremely resistant to change, especially if they are reinforced by an intense victimhood psychology. Until these attitudes, feelings, behaviors, and mentality are changed, no solution is possible.

The first step in getting Turkish-Armenian relations back on track is to replace negative stereotypes with new and accurate information about each group. Transforming

³ Vamik Volkan, *The Need to Have Enemies and Allies*, Northvale, New Jersey, London, 1988, p. 261. 4 Joseph V. Montville, Vorwort, in: Vamik Volkan, *op.cit.* [3], p. xi.

⁴ Joseph V. Montville, Vorwort, in: Vamik Volkan, *op.cit.* [3], p. xi.

⁵ Demetrious A. Julius, "The Genesis and Perpetuation of Aggression in International Conflicts." In Vamik Volkan, *op.cit.* [3], p. 101.

public consciousness is the starting point in every effort at conflict resolution.

Dialogue and Reconciliation

I take the existence of the Turkish state policy of genocide denial as a constant, unchangeable given; it is a policy that has been made consciously and will not change for a considerable period of time. The basic problem is that this policy seems to determine how Turks and Armenians speak about the Genocide, and how they relate to each other. It is not an exaggeration to say that the existence of Turkish state policy is the epicenter for all thinking on the issue of the Genocide. The discourse, the language is mostly determined by the paradigm created by the policy of denial.

Without downplaying the importance and crucial character of this policy, I would argue that there is something hypocritical in this fixation. It seems to me that both Turks and Armenians, at least in critical circles, are hiding behind the Turkish state policy. They are sequestering themselves in order to avoid making themselves active participants in this process of debate on the Genocide. Both societies tend to see each other through the prism of this policy of denial. The relationship between the two communities is chained to this Turkish state policy. Both societies are essentially prisoners of this paradigm. The basic question here is how they can break free from this prison, because this is the basic obstacle to the reconciliation.

One important consequence of this hypocrisy is the lack of self-reflection. Neither group is capable of approaching itself critically. Both groups shift the blame for all the problems onto the denial policy but I do not think this is the whole story.