

From Past Genocide to Present Perpetrator— Victim Group Relations and Long-Term Resolution

A Philosophical Critique

By Henry C. Theriault

In recent years, there has been much discussion of relations between Armenians and Turks. A movement toward what is termed “reconciliation” has emerged, with committed adherents in both general groups. A key fracture between different participants has turned on the role, if any, that the “events of 1915” should play in contemporary relations. Some Turks with a denialist agenda have argued that “claims” about Turkish violence against Armenians in the past should be set aside so as not to keep driving tensions between the two groups. Some progressive Turks who might accept that the Armenian Genocide is a historical fact as well as some Armenians have joined in this approach.¹ Their utilitarian calculation is clear: The past cannot be changed, but if by putting aside the past we can effect a more positive present and future, then it is right to do so, even for Armenians who will benefit in various ways. I will examine the logic of this kind of claim below; here I wish only to point out that it functions to distinguish some Armenians from others relative to relations with Turks.

Some progressive Turks and many Armenians, on the other hand, see broad state and societal acknowledgment of the Armenian Genocide as the key to improved relations. Typically, they hold that such an acknowledgment will cause or signal a dramatic shift in Turkish attitudes toward Armenians (and Armenian attitudes toward Turks), erasing the primary cause of contemporary



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Turkish prejudice against Armenians and Armenian “prejudice” against Turks. (Turkish prejudice is a structural problem. While Armenians are often accused of anti-Turkish prejudice simply for raising the genocide issue. There might be individual prejudices, but these are not systematic and have no structural impact.) Indeed, some progressive Turks go so far as to say that this acknowledgment will force an opening in the Turkish ultranationalist, anti-democratic ideology and institutions that have hindered political progress in Turkey and thus transform Turkey positively.² Some Armenians agree and take this transformation of Turkey as their ultimate goal. Just as typically, the Turks and Armenians stop there:

entreaty and clerical pronouncement. Resolution is not an event or outcome; it is a process, a very long-term process. Armenian-Turkish relations are not a simple all-or-nothing proposition, either “in tension” or “worked out perfectly.” They are better or worse along a continuum of fine gradations, with no bold line between “good” and “bad” relations. Likewise, they are not fixed, but can fluctuate through time in trajectories of improvement and deterioration. And, as I discuss below, they are greatly complicated by the fact that different Turks and Armenians as well as their governments, institutions, organizations, etc., themselves vary in attitude and behavior, and interact with one another in all sorts of different ways.

If the Armenian Genocide issue is set aside in order not to antagonize or alienate Turks, so that they willingly engage in a relationship with Armenians, the apparently smooth result will not be a resolution.

Not only is acknowledgment necessary for improved relations, it is sufficient as well. Hrant Dink seems to have been in this camp.

Finally, some Armenians and a few Turks see the need for a deeper process relative to the Armenian Genocide and contemporary Armenian-Turkish relations. They typically call for a reparative route as the foundation for improved relations³: the Turkish government and society must make substantive strides to repair the damage done by the Armenian Genocide, even if all parties recognize that anything approaching full restitution is impossible—the dead can never be brought back to life, and the suffering, even intergenerational, can never be eliminated. At best, the prospects for future Armenian survival can be improved and the identity of Armenians made more secure. While I hold that the path to resolution is through reparation that includes support for the security of Armenian society and identity, I do not hold that even this, taken alone, is the correct model for “reconciliation” between Armenians and Turks.

The basis of the view I share with a few in the Armenian and possibly Turkish communities is not simply—following Raymond Winbush’s critique of white-black reconciliation efforts in the contemporary United States⁴—that “reconciliation” is impossible because there was never a period of stable “conciliation” between Armenians and Turks prior to the genocide. If a certain naivete about history and inter-group relations is revealed by the very use of the term “reconciliation,” we can address this by shifting our terminology to, say, Armenian-Turkish “resolution.” But there is a deeper problem, the assumption that there can be a single, decisive transition from “unresolved” to “resolved” through an act or set of acts. This assumption shared by antagonists from Turkish deniers to committed Armenian activists is curiously Christian, echoing the notion of instantaneous absolution for sins through supplicant

In the case where there is no acknowledgment of the Armenian Genocide, it is trivially obvious that no resolution can occur. If the Armenian Genocide issue is set aside in order not to antagonize or alienate Turks, so that they willingly engage in a relationship with Armenians, the apparently smooth result will not be a resolution. The genocide issue cannot be resolved if it is not even engaged. The “conciliation” will be an illusion, because it will depend on a denial of reality and will hold only so long as Armenians themselves accept the success of the genocide and, in a sense, the right of Turks to have committed it. Turks who are not willing to engage the genocide issue are refusing to give up the anti-Armenian attitude behind the genocide itself. Even if that attitude is not displayed explicitly because of Armenian deference does not mean it is not there, but rather that its target is not presenting itself.

Now let us say that acknowledgment occurs. Acknowledgment might be presented as an end in itself—from a Turkish governmental perspective, Armenians will have had their due and should stop bothering “us.” In such a case, nothing will have been accomplished but the uttering of words that do not have meaning. The work of building better Armenian-Turkish relations and of resolving the outstanding issues of the Armenian Genocide will remain open tasks that must be undertaken. If anything, an empty “acknowledgment” will make that future work more difficult, by creating the false impression that something, maybe everything, has already been accomplished.

Here the word is misrepresented as the deed. The pronouncement that the issue has been resolved is mistaken for the reality that it has been resolved. I do not mean to suggest that verbal pronouncements necessarily have no meaning. But they have meaning only when they reflect material and social-structural changes

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or cause them. And in this case, no real change will have occurred, except in the subjective perceptions of some Armenians, some Turks, and some others. Though changes in attitudes can result in changes in behavior, treatment, and thus structure of relations, even if some people change their attitudes, if the acknowledgment by the state and broad society is not accompanied by widespread change, it is not meaningful. Here in my argument two threads intertwine. The second thread is argument for the claim that, in the case of Armenian-Turkish relations, something more than a change in subjective attitudes, even widespread, is necessary. I will return to this point below, after finishing out the first thread.

Let us now say that acknowledgment is presented as confirmation that changes are occurring or even have already occurred in Turkish attitudes toward Armenians and the genocide. Is this then a terminus? What is this acknowledgment except a promise? Clearly this is the case if the acknowledgment is meant to establish new relations: The acknowledgment is meaningful only if those relations are actually established. Yet, even if it is the statement that attitudes and relations have already changed, then to be meaningful it must be a promise that those changes will hold. After all, acknowledgment tomorrow could give way to worsened relations and retraction the day after, just as happened in Australia, where a 1997 government report confirming that the policy of forced removal of aboriginal children constituted genocide was later recanted by the Australian government.

Finally, what if acknowledgment is confirmed by reparation, for instance, the return of lands depopulated of Armenians through genocide, to the original Wilsonian boundaries of the 1918 Republic? Clearly this would be closer to producing a sustainably improved relationship between Armenians and Turks. As I have argued previously, the giving of reparations, especially land reparations, transforms acknowledgment and apology into concrete, meaningful acts rather than mere rhetoric: Reparations are a sacrifice on the part of the perpetrator group's progeny that confirm the sincerity of expressed regret.⁵ Would reparation, then, represent a resolution of the Armenian Genocide issue? The historical evidence says no. After all, in 1919, the then-Ottoman government accepted transfer of such land to the new Armenian Republic, as a form of restitution for the genocide, restitution to support the reconstitution of the Armenian people. Within two years, however, the ultranationalist Kemal Ataturk and his forces had renounced this transfer and militarily invaded and conquered these lands, which have remained part of the Republic of Turkey ever since. This act ushered in the long post-genocide period of Turkish antagonism against Armenians that has continued to this day in various forms, from an aggressively pursued, extensive campaign of genocide denial to military and other assistance to Azerbaijan in its attempted ethnic cleansing of Armenians in the Karabagh region.

What even this approach fails to recognize is that any act of resolution is not an endpoint but the beginning of an obligatory

ongoing effort by the Turkish state and society to take the actions and maintain the changes necessary to ensure good relations with Armenians. Descartes provides a relevant concept of permanence through time that can be applied to this view of Armenian-Turkish relations. According to Descartes, it is incorrect to see God's creation of the world as a single act that guarantees the future existence of the world. There is no inertia of existence. On the contrary, at every moment God must re-cause the world for it to exist.⁶ If we set aside the religious element here, we can recognize a more general principle: Social relations and structures do not maintain themselves, but require a constant application of effort. Thus, positive relations between Turks and Armenians are not made permanent simply by being enacted at a given point in time. They must be reproduced and supported at every moment, or the relations will degenerate.

The reasons for this are more obvious than for the continued existence of the world as Descartes treats it. His is a metaphysical speculation, the acceptance of a possible metaphysical principle that says an effect does not outlast its cause. This is in fact not a tenable view, if we hold that a given state endures until a counter-force is applied, as in Newtonian physics. But, in the case of Armenian-Turkish relations, two major counter-forces are already in place. If sustained improvement in Armenian-Turkish relations is to be achieved, it will require long-term pressure against these forces.

First is a widespread and active anti-Armenian prejudice. It is manifested in the never-ending stream of anti-Armenian vitriol in the Turkish media, including its English-language extension; political statements and policies; attitudes on the street; the public support for the trial and assassination of Hrant Dink; and even the harassment and threats against Turkish scholars who recognize the Armenian Genocide. Even if the government of Turkey recognizes the Armenian Genocide, this will not necessarily transform those who are explicitly prejudiced against Armenians. In fact, it could heighten their negative attitudes and actions against Armenians in a backlash, recalling the way in which Armenian civil-rights activism "provoked" genocidal violence against them in 1915. This attitude at once pre-dates the genocide as a causal factor, exhibited by and tapped by the Committee of Union and Progress, and was extended and intensified by the success of the genocide. The Turkish ultranationalist Ottoman government, with broad participation by Turkish society, acted on its prejudices with impunity, and has never been called to account for those acts. The attitudes have thus been preserved within Turkish state and society, persisting because no rehabilitative counter-force has been applied. Indeed, one can argue that the success of the Armenian Genocide and the way in which nearly universal horrific violence against Armenians became a core norm of Turkey in 1915 actually supported an increased anti-Armenianism based on the belief that Armenians are fit targets of the most extreme prejudice and violence, which can be perpetrated with absolute

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impunity. This general trend is true despite the heroic efforts of some Turks then to oppose the genocide and now to oppose its denial.

Second, the result of genocide is not a neutral disengagement of the perpetrator and victim groups, but the imposition of an extreme dominance of perpetrator group over victim group. If prior to the

of a Turkish dialogue partner will not necessarily challenge the dominance relation in which Turks and Armenians are caught.⁸

This suggests an important distinction. So far, I have not distinguished clearly between “conciliation” and “resolution.” But does resolution of the genocide issue have to include conciliation? If the key to resolution is eliminating dismantling the domination pro-

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Armenian Genocide, Turks and other Muslims as a group were formally and practically dominant over Armenians as a group, the genocide maximized this, to give Turks and other Muslims absolute dominance to the level of life and death over Armenians. Often we mistake the end of a genocide for the end of the harm done to the victims. It is the end of the direct killing, perhaps, but the result of that killing and all other dimensions of a genocide is to raise the power and position of the perpetrator group high above that of victims, in material terms—political, economic, etc.⁷ Resolution of the Armenian Genocide requires reversing this domination.

Can this be accomplished through a change in relations between Armenians and Turks? At an individual level, good relations are possible, but this does not guarantee a change in overall group relations. Inter-group relations are very complex, and are best understood as resultant vectors or overall patterns. Turks and Armenians relate to members of their own groups and the other group in all sorts of ways. Attitudes and acts of Turks can directly enact or support domination of Armenians, can be neutral with respect to that domination, or can even resist that domination. What is more, the resistance, for instance, can be by means of a direct engagement with Turkish anti-Armenianism or an embrace of abstract humanism. While the latter might be a counter-force against Turkish ultranationalism, it can also be at cross-purposes to the direct engagement approach. Thus, a move against ultranationalism is not necessarily in line with absolute progress in Armenian-Turkish relations. What is more, in some cases Armenians and Turks have very close individual relationships that can even take primacy over intra-group tensions. All these factors play out to determine the overall structure of the relationship of Turks to Armenians as general groups. And this model indicates that individual attitudes and resistances, while they can influence group relations, do not determine them. The best intentions on the part

duced or reinforced by genocide, then the answer is no. Instead, resolution of the issue might be seen as the prerequisite of conciliation. Just, fair, and positive relations between Turks and Armenians cannot produce a resolution of the genocide issue, but in fact can occur only on the basis of that resolution, that is, the ending of the dominance relation. If a good relationship must be free and uncoerced, then so long as the Armenian Genocide issue is unresolved, truly positive group relations between Armenians and Turks are not possible. For, within a dominance relation, there can be no truly free, uncoerced relations. It is only through a moment of disengagement after resolution that Armenians and Turks can then try to build a new form of relation disconnected from and thus not determined by the Armenian Genocide. Even the desire to build good relations with Turks as a group is a function of the genocide, a desire to have one’s humanity recognized by the progeny of the original perpetrators as a way of subjectively—not actually—erasing the impact of the Armenian Genocide.

Similarly, good relations with Armenians might have for some Turks a therapeutic function that displaces the putative goal of resolving the Armenian Genocide. Being accepted by Armenians might authorize the subjective perception by such Turks that the genocide issue is resolved, when it is not. Turkish-Armenian dialogue might then be seen to be a matter of self-interest of Turks, even an exploitation of Armenians for the psychological benefit of Turks in which Armenians fulfill the psychological needs of Turks while their own objective need for resolution of the genocide issue is pushed aside.

There remains an alternative possibility for resolution of the Armenian Genocide issue embraced by many Turkish and Armenian progressives, that is, the democratic transformation of



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Turkey. The logic is clear: If Turkey is transformed into a true liberal democracy, with universal territorial citizenship, equal participation of citizens in governmental decision-making, and protected individual rights for all citizens regardless of ethnicity and religion (and, one would hope, gender, sexuality, and race), then “the Armenian Question” will be solved. Armenians in Turkey will be full citizens with every right protected. They will be free to be Armenians and Turkish citizens. And, a democratic Turkey with free speech protected will no longer penalize discussion of the Armenian Genocide. Sooner or later, the truth will take hold, and the denialist machinery of government, academia, and media will become obsolete and silent. Turkey will recognize the Armenian Genocide and the need to treat Armenians humanely. It will make good on the promise of the 1908 Revolution to establish a multinational liberal democracy in Turkey. And, democracy will be a cure-all for Turkish society.

It is true that the democratization of Turkey could bring these results. But the history of modern liberal democracies suggests otherwise. The United States maintained an expanding democracy throughout its first century of existence, and yet maintained just as strongly the slavery of people of African descent and pursued genocidal policies against Native Americans. During its second century, it maintained a long-term apartheid segregationist system followed by a sophisticated form of neo-racist domination that is still with us today—and yet it celebrates a comprehensive democracy. This is to say nothing of American democracy’s participation in the recent genocides in Indonesia, East Timor, and Guatemala. Britain could self-congratulate on its wonderful constitutional democratic institutions while maintaining colonial rule in India and beyond. France today is a great democracy, except for Arabs. And so on. In short, there is nothing about the democratization of Turkey that is in the least inconsistent with a continued, pervasive anti-Armenianism. On the contrary, one might almost see racism against some minority inside or outside a state’s borders as an invariable accompaniment of modern democracy. Do people need someone who is lower in order to accept equality across most of a society?

The danger is that the public profession of democracy and civil rights for all in Turkey might mask a situation in which rampant anti-Armenian prejudice renders those rights empty and even dangerous in exercise. The fact is that the democratization of Turkey in itself is nothing to Armenians: Its essence will be a redistribution of power and decision-making among the majority segments of the society. The very foundations of Turkish national identity, statehood, and culture were formed through genocide of Armenians and other Ottoman minorities. The assumption that mere democratization, a mere shifting of power relations, can address these foundational issues is naive. Armenians cannot simply be folded into a general democratic process. What Armenians are in Turkey and beyond today has been deeply impacted and shaped by the raw political and material facts of genocide and its unmitigated, expanding effects over more than nine decades. Any change in Armenians’ status must directly address this history and the present that it has produced. However well-intentioned, the

integration of Armenians into Turkish society requires much more than calls of “We are all Armenians.” (I have to ask, can it even be called *Turkish* society if it is to integrate Armenians? Will this not be just another result of the genocide, the folding of Armenians into Turkish identity?) In any event, Turks are not Armenians, not because progressive Turks refuse the connection nor because Armenians do, but because an unresolved history forces a difference in basic material terms.

The goal of my analysis has not been to paint the picture of a hopeless situation, but rather to appraise realistically the effectiveness of Armenian-Turkish dialogue and other approaches for resolving the Armenian Genocide issue. The conclusion I draw is simple: There is no easy path to resolution, no single step that can be taken to reverse the damage of the Armenian Genocide. What is more, resolution does not require Armenian-Turkish dialogue or positive relations; it requires an end to the Turkish dominance relation over Armenians and repair of at least some of the damage done by it before, during, and after the Armenian Genocide. Further, while democratic transformation of Turkey might be desirable in itself, it is not a guarantee of resolution of the Armenian Genocide issue. □

ENDNOTES

- 1 Probably the best known example of denialist Turks joined with Armenians who, at least temporarily, set aside the Armenian Genocide is the Turkish-Armenian Reconciliation Commission (TARC).
- 2 This is, for instance, Taner Akcam’s view, as stated for instance in his remarks at the Commonwealth of Massachusetts’ Official 91st Anniversary Commemoration of the Armenian Genocide, House of Representatives Chamber, Massachusetts State House, April 21, 2006.
- 3 I myself have argued for this position in “Justice or Peace? The Meanings, Potentials, and Pitfalls of Armenian-Turkish Dialogue,” paper, International Association of Genocide Scholars 5th Biennial Conference, Irish Human Rights Center, National University of Ireland, June 8, 2003; “Land-based Reparations: The Case of the Armenian Genocide and Its Comparison to Native American Land Claims,” paper, “Whose Debt? Whose Responsibility?” Global Symposium on Reparations, Worcester State College, Dec. 10, 2005; “The Case for Reparations,” paper, Armenians and the Left Conference, City University of New York Graduate Center, April 8, 2006; and “Beyond Democratization: Perpetrator Societal Rehabilitation and Ethical Transformation in the Aftermath of Genocide,” paper, “The Armenian Genocide: Intersections of Scholarship, Human Rights, and Politics” Symposium, Watertown, Mass., April 24, 2007.
- 4 “Should America Pay?” lecture, Worcester State College, March 29, 2007.
- 5 “Justice or Peace?”
- 6 See René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. Donald A. Cress, 3rd ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993), p. 33.
- 7 These ideas I first presented in “Toward a New Conceptual Framework for Resolution: The Necessity of Recognizing the Perpetrator-Victim Dominance Relation in the Aftermath of Genocide,” paper, 7th Biennial Conference of the International Association of Genocide Scholars, Boca Raton, Fla., June 7, 2005.
- 8 This emphasis on the structure, not individual, nature of oppression is influenced by Marilyn Frye’s “Oppression” chapter in *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory* (Freedom, Calif.: Crossing Press, 1983), pp. 1–16.



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