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The Armenian genocide: Issues of responsibility and democracy

An interview with Susan Neiman and Andreas Huyssen

The conference "Ottoman Armenians during the decline of the empire: Issues of scientific responsibility and democracy", held at Istanbul Bilgi University in 2005, marked the beginning of a fierce public debate on the "Armenian issue" in Turkey. Attempts to hold the conference at Bosphorous University were twice blocked by the Turkish government, and in a speech given to the members of the parliament before the conference, the Turkish minister of justice accused the conference organizers and participants of treason. The "Armenian issue" then emerged "full-blown onto the public sphere".

The public debate has had tragic consequences and has eventually led to the marginalization of many Turkish intellectuals who argued that Turkey must come to terms with its past. Tensions finally boiled over with the assassination of the outspoken Turkish–Armenian journalist Hrant Dink. Many attribute the act to the increasing influence of nationalist discourses that are flourishing in the run–up to the general elections this year.

Hrant Dink's murder marks a new phase in the history of the "Armenian issue" in Turkey. With the formation of a violent ultra–nationalist front opposed to any public discussion of the genocide, it is a taboo that has become ever more dangerous to break.

But the duties remain the same. The murder of Hrant Dink was an attempt to silence the voice of dialogue. It must be countered with more dialogue and more analysis. Insisting on the continuing relevance of issues of responsibility and democracy is a way of paying tribute to Dink's memory, a way of translating his legacy "into the jargon of the living".

In December 2005, in the wake of the above–mentioned conference, E. Efe Çakmak asked a number of scholars from various disciplines within the humanities to comment on Turkey's official policy regarding the "Armenian issue" — a policy that has not changed since. We have merged two of these interviews into one text, in which Susan Neiman and Andreas Huyssen, both representatives of the first post–Auschwitz generation, talk about the role that can be played by the public sphere in reflecting and guiding a politics of memory.

E. Efe Çakmak: According to the consensus that has reigned for years among Turkish politicians, the Armenian genocide is a subject for historical study only; historians alone have the authority to come to conclusions about the massacre. Recently, and in line with this assumption, the Turkish government

opened the Ottoman archives for historical study of the "Armenian issue". For some, this represents a method of denial that does not hide or destroy the evidence, but attempts to manipulate the politics of remembering. What would you say about this move and how would you suggest it be dealt with?

Susan Neiman: We need to find a balance between specialists' work and that of normal, concerned citizens. It's clear that some kinds of claims can only be settled by historians; the rest of us don't have the time, and often not the tools, to weigh evidence properly. But (1) historians can be misled, or ideologically blinded, like anyone else and (2) the question of whether a nation committed genocide is part of a question of national identity — and this is not merely of historical interest but of interest to every citizen. The ideal way to proceed would be for a variety of citizens — from professional intellectuals of different fields (philosophy, anthropology, political science, sociology being among the more central) to concerned citizens who may not be intellectuals — to be part of a national dialogue with historians. None of us are infallible, and all of us, no matter how smart or educated in no matter which field, are subject to intellectual temptations. Here I do think the German postwar experience is a helpful model. It has been extraordinarily painful, and I don't wish it on anyone, but there has been a national discussion that has gone on at every level of society over a period of decades. Historians have played a crucial role in this, but the contributions of other intellectuals, artists, journalists, and so on have played a role as well, and what has emerged is a kind of consensus, and a framework for dealing with past crimes.

Yes, this seems like a very interesting example of a new form of denial. It sounds as if it bears comparison with many American methods. Under the Bush Administration, there has been an increasing resort to old-fashioned lies, but the normal problem in American politics is another. Everything is available, as information, and there is so much of it that nothing really matters. Compare this with the role of censorship in eastern European countries before 1989. There you had a terrible official suppression of information, but people were often all the more ingenious for seeking it out in underground publications, and they cared about the truth all the more. Censorship is actually the most effective way to arouse people's interest in political truths and their consequences. If you want people to lose interest in the truth, all you have to do is give them too much of it; even under the best of circumstances, most people are under sufficient pressure with their own work and families that they will simply give up before a mountain of evidence.

I think that the opposition should concentrate on making sure that the intellectuals who recognize Armenian suffering are not marginal, but the best that there are. This is why it's important that Pamuk has put himself on the line, and it simply means that more first-rate Turkish thinkers and writers should follow his example.

The Turks and the Armenians are not the only people who suffer from this problem: the attempt to quantify the amount of absolute evil, and then decide who has suffered the most of it, infects a great deal of contemporary political discourse — and concrete politics. Here the struggle between Israelis and Palestinians is paradigm, but a similar contest in comparative suffering is also part of the discourse on the US Right, for example, and there are many other examples. This kind of thing shows the attempt to find and fix an essence of evil, and to measure it, to be not just silly but potentially dangerous. It isn't possible, and the search for it is absolutely counterproductive. Rather, we should acknowledge that evil comes in different forms; that evil is not

commensurable; and focus on understanding the shapes and the causes of each one differently. The search for one form of evil is almost always coupled with the desire to prove that one form of suffering (that of one's own ethnic group, usually) is worse than any other, and to implicitly deny recognition of others' misery. Philosophers, and other thinkers, might be helpful here by providing descriptions which are possible and might actually help us understand something, rather than definitions, which do not.

Andreas Huyssen: Two years ago, I participated in a conference on the politics of memory at Bogazici University in Istanbul. At that time, the discourse in Turkey about violence in inter-ethnic relations in Ottoman and post-Ottoman days was still limited to small groups of intellectuals, and one could have hardly imagined that the topic of that conference would soon emerge full-blown onto the public sphere.

As a German of the first post-war and post-Auschwitz generation, I have been engaged for the better part of my intellectual and academic life with issues of memory and guilt, history and responsibility for the genocide perpetrated by the Germans during the Third Reich. The slow development over the decades of what is called *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, or "coming to terms with the past", has been amply documented in historical research, in the public media, and in memorial discourses in literature and the arts. At the same time, the search for some European cultural identity in the slow process of European unification has generated intense debates in many European nations about their active or passive participation in the Holocaust, about the collective European trauma of the world war, and about their own histories of perpetrating massive violence in the context of civil war (Spain) or colonialism (France). As a united Europe constitutes itself not just in liberal-democratic institutional terms, but also in terms of cultural identities, such debates have become a mark of the strength of civil society and its ability to face rather than to erase histories of state terror, massacres, racism, and genocide. Considering the debates about the *desaparecidos* and the state terror in Latin America, the debate in India and Pakistan about the violent partition, the question of the Korean comfort women, and the Japanese massacres in Nanjing, the creation of various truth commissions in South Africa and Latin America, one might even say that the German case is only one example of a by now global phenomenon. National identities have become increasingly self-reflexive, as nations seek democratic legitimacy as much from facing violent pasts as from developing visions of the future. Turkey is in the process of joining this transnational public debate, which, despite its global resonances, is always fiercely national and local.

I take two lessons from it all. Any such coming to terms with legacies of genocidal or colonial violence is inevitably painful for succeeding generations. However, the realities of the past must be faced to secure the grounds for a democratic polity and to establish a new sense of nationhood in an increasingly interconnected world of nations. That is why the recent liberalization moves in Turkey, including the opening of state archives, have to be welcome not for the sake of Europe, but for the sake of Turkey's future. Of course, any historian's archival work can distort the evidence, and records can be destroyed. Therefore the integrity of archives and the completeness of records must be part of public discussion. Professional historiography must come together with public memory to establish the truth about the past and make that truth an integral part of national self-understanding. Laws that can be used to prosecute "insults to Turkishness" are in the end as counter-productive as the proposed criminalization of flag burning in the United States. A national identity

oriented to the future can simply no longer be based on prohibitions and on the erasure of the past.

Secondly, it is only normal that any and all such public memorial practices will be deeply contested politically. That contestation, however, must take place in public debate rather than in the courts or through police repression. Even where the facts of genocide or state violence are not disputed, the establishment of genocidal intentionality, chain of command, and personal responsibilities in the judicial sense often remain bones of contention. As we know, the devil is in the detail. The work of history and of public memory must be done jointly. The outcome will often be messy. For bad faith is not only to be found in those who simply prefer to forget, as some memorians would claim, but often also among those who want to remember.

It is obvious that the memory of the "Armenian genocide" is exploding in the context of Turkey's strained relationship with the EU. European progressives favouring Turkish EU membership want Turkey to have a public debate about the corpses in the cellar of the Turkish Republic. This issue, however, should be de-dramatized. After all, such a public discussion would do no more than have Turkey join other European countries which have begun to face their own unsavoury pasts. The forces aligned against Turkish membership, however, see the law that prosecutes any mention of the massacres of 1915 or the more recent war against the Kurds as yet another reason (if not pretence) to keep Turkey permanently out of the EU. Both sides thus emphasize the need of Turkey to remember, even though with radically opposed intentions. Bad faith is especially strong in the second case. At any rate, given the international debate about human rights, the g-word, and civil society, Turkish memory is no longer just a domestic affair. While it has transnational reverberations, the solutions will have to be found within the Turkish polity itself. The current trials against writers and journalists based on Article 301 of the reform law, however, make it clear that what is at stake is not just the mention of genocide or ethnocide (and I understand that the political and legal implications of the g-word are considerable on all sides). At stake is the guarantee of free expression altogether. Orhan Pamuk put it well when he said that what stained a country's "honour" is not the discussion of the black spots in its history but the impossibility of any discussion at all. Having witnessed how the public acknowledgment of the Holocaust emerged in Germany against multiple nationalist, religious, and even secular leftist resistances to such public memory, I trust that in the end Turkey, too, will be able to follow a similar path. After all, the deep histories of Turkey and the nations of Europe are closely intertwined. In the long run and despite formidable institutional and political issues to be solved, the paths of Turkey and the EU will converge — if Turkey can face its past and if the EU, with its growing Muslim population, can acknowledge that it must be more than a Christian club.

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