

NEW AVENUES FOR ARMENIA'S DEVELOPMENT

Edward Tiryakian

*Professor Emeritus of Sociology,
Duke University (USA)*

Introduction

Let me begin with a brief apology. Although Armenian on both sides of my family, with my paternal and maternal grandparents born in Constantinople, and both separately having to leave just in advance of the 1896 "troubles", a.k.a., pogroms launched under Abdul Hamid II, I grew up and have lived almost my entire life outside an Armenian community. I do not speak Armenian (save for a meager vocabulary from childhood days), and have only been once to Armenia (in June 2009). Although over the course of an academic career that started 60 years ago, I have written fairly extensively on a variety of social science topics, I have not previously written in the field of Armenian Studies, nor have I given any courses about Armenia.

So what is my excuse for putting down some provocative thoughts about Armenia's development? I can assure readers that I am very proud of my Armenian cultural and family heritage, including that my maternal grandfather, Yervant Agathon Bey was a co-founder of the Armenian General Benevolent Union. A good deal of my professional interest in nationalism, national identity, and ethnic conflicts – about which I have published considerably¹-- has as one source that Armenia has long been a nation, but not only a short while enjoyed the status of a recognized nation-state. I have been very concerned that Armenia's geopolitical situation is that of a precariously situated small state, like Israel, surrounded by states with which it does not enjoy "normal" relations.

In the next few pages I will draw from my familiarity with global development issues and some observations from my 2009 travel to Armenia to suggest three possible avenues for policy development. Underlying this is my basic commitment to have a more viable Armenia, and conversely, for it to be a less fragile state so as to avoid the fate of the first Armenian Republic (1918-1920).²

1. Tourism

The economic significance of tourism as a global industry passed a milestone last year with one billion tourists recorded by the World Tourist Organization for the first time, and tourist receipts amounting to over USD \$1 trillion (€740 billion).³ Obviously Armenia is well aware of this, and the government's Ministry of Economy, perhaps optimistically, declared in 2010 that half a million tourists had visited Armenia in 2009, and anticipated (even more optimistically) a better than 50% growth rate in 2011.⁴ Undoubtedly, Armenia has many potential attractions to stimulate diaspora and non-diaspora Armenians alike to come for visits. Quite likely, there may be an increase in "doom tourism"⁵: diaspora Armenians coming in the spring of 2015 and thereafter in commemoration of the 100th anniversary memorial of the start of the calamitous genocide. Counterbalancing those sites (many of which are outside Armenia proper) are the man-made and nature-made wonders which need no introduction to Armenians: Lake Sevan, and the UNESCO World Heritage sites of the great monasteries of Haghpat, Sanahin, Geghard, among others, and of course the cultural heart of the country at Echmiadzin.

The Armenian government seems well aware of the importance and the socioeconomic potential of tourism (job creation, balance-of-payments, economic diversification, increasing public awareness of Armenia situation), witness it being taken as a "priority" area in the Ministry of Economy. Still, I would like to suggest some further ways of modernizing this industry, partly based on my observations during my brief 2009 stay.

As a start, it would do well if at the cabinet level, a Minister of Tourism would be set up with diverse functions and sufficient budget to prepare videos and attractive information materials in major Western languages (English, French, Spanish, German) for distribution in consular offices and in the websites of major embassy posts. The Ministry would host major international travel agencies and organize tours of important sites in Armenia, and at key sites, such as historical monasteries and museums, have available in English and French, as well as in Armenian and Russian, informative materials. I found disconcerting that the road leading from the center of Yerevan to the Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute had no markers pointing to this most important historical site. Markers should be prominently displayed, and a stranger to Yerevan may have no way of knowing how to reach it. Yet, it is a remarkable

complex, which should have multi-lingual brochures available for distribution, in hotels, travel agencies, and the like, inside and outside Armenia.

Whether this is the responsibility of the ministry of Tourism, or one of the Economy, to upgrade the tourist industry, considerable effort must be given to really improving the road infrastructure from Yerevan to major visitors' sites (even if this entails establishing toll roads). And at these sites, such as centuries old monasteries, a modernization of toilet facilities (as an upgrade of the simple outdoors) is a prime requisite!

Brief, the potential for developing Armenia is very substantial and deservedly so, but the country—equally its private and public sectors-- has to be motivated to become attractive to non-Armenian tourists. Publicity and coordination with overseas travel bureaus and agencies is essential, whether in already established Western countries or some of the new affluent sectors of Asia.

II. Building a Transcaucasian Technological Center

Again drawing on the example of Israel, Armenia should give high priority to building and developing a world class technological research complex, bringing together the public and the private sectors, freed from political machinations. Although major research centers – Tsukuba in Japan, Bangalore in India, MIT-Harvard in Cambridge, Massachusetts, Silicon Valley—are very complex, multi-dimensional entities, each with its own dynamics, they are recognized in bringing together entrepreneurial skills, economic skills, and human resources. It would be to Armenia's benefit if the Ministry of Education and Science, the International Science and Technology Center, and similar structures would send missions abroad to study the functioning of selected research centers, say in Israel, Asia, North America, Europe and the Russian Federation. At the same time, the Ministry of Urban Development should be on the lookout for a site relatively close to Yerevan and its airport where the research complex might be developed.

Obviously, Armenia has very limited resources, and it will need to rely on significant assistance from its diaspora for financial, technological, and other resources. A scientific research center should draw from Armenian scholars overseas, such as the National Association of Armenian Studies, to make an inventory of who and what areas of research might be available for short-term or longer-term stay in early phases of the complex's development. It will also

need to draw upon resources from non-diaspora sources, including architects, engineers, and other major world leaders in scientific and technological development.

To make Armenia a regional prime center in the Caucasus of scientific and technological know-how⁶ may well seem to be a utopian vision. It cannot be done overnight with a magic wand, but it is a vision of the future that is realizable and can provide a sustained motivation for the coming generations of young Armenians and those of Armenian descent. An important start has already been put in place with the Tumo Center for Creative Technologies and the advanced training it gives to bright young Armenian minds. It is a form of cultural nationalism that can enhance the pride Armenians already have in great cultural deeds, such as Armenia the first country to adopt Christianity (or in a somewhat lesser exploit, expatriate Armenian cultivators in France bringing their expertise knowledge for the distilling of brandy in the 14th Century, that became known today as *Armagnac*).

III. Collaborative Research and Teaching

The third avenue of development I will propose is the least expensive in terms of drams, but for some it will seem like an excessive psychological cost. What I wish to propose is the setting up of a collaborative program in research among Armenian and Turkish scholars, with say a three year pilot program. Let me provide a rationale for this project, which might initially appear shocking.

In the course of a long professional career, I have been in numerous situations where the "other" was a national from a country at odds with an "other" from a country seen as antagonistic. This was particularly true during the peak of the Cold War, when I attended international meetings of sociologists in Canada and in Sweden. I noted that American and Soviet social scientists far from focusing from sensitive political controversies were eager to discuss with each other research and theoretical matters they shared in common. Sociologists – my professional clan—at those meetings did not let ideology get in the way of friendly, courteous informative exchanges.

One of the organizations I belong to, the International Association of French-speaking Sociologists (AISLF), has on its executive committee elected representatives from various regions of the world. On that committee I have met over the years at least two Turkish sociologists (both women), and past

relations between Turks and Armenians never came up to sour our working together on intellectual programs of AISLF.

As I planned my trip to Yerevan for my first visit to Armenia in 2009, I had come across biographical materials of one of my grandfathers who attended Roberts College in Constantinople in the 1870s. Not having been to Turkey, I decided to stop there on the way to Yerevan. Besides finding a record of my grandfather as a schoolboy at Robert College (since 1971 Bogazici University), I renewed acquaintance with one of the Turkish professors I had known at AISLF. It was probably there in Istanbul that I began thinking about Armenian and Turkish sociologists having various academic concerns that they share and which might be pursued in collaborative research. I was given the names of some Turkish sociologists who either had some contacts with Armenian sociologists and/or who would attend professional meetings in Armenia.

When I subsequently went to Yerevan to attend meetings of the International Institute of Sociology (with its headquarters in Sweden), I was able to invite one of the Turkish sociologist whose name had been given to me in Istanbul. She came and not only gave a fine paper that was well received, but also showed her support for an exchange program and gave me other names to contact. Likewise, I found in Yerevan Armenian sociologists interested in an exchange program, one which might not only have occasional meetings but also sustained collaborative research, and even teaching (probably in English as a common language) or lecturing in one another's universities.

For sociologists, whether Armenian or Turkish, there are areas of common pursuit: emigration and demographic trends, disaster research (particularly earthquake and post-disaster reconstruction), family and gender issues, and so on.

Given adequate publicity, and the backing of the appropriate ministries in Armenia and Turkey, as well as the Organization for Security & Co-Operation in Europe (OSCE), a three year exchange program involving private and state universities could be drawn up relatively fast with modest start-up cost (in the \$30,000- \$50,000 range) that could be covered by an overseas foundation.⁷

What would this accomplish? More than simply having some academics exchange information and produce some research papers. It would demonstrate the possibility of a rapprochement between academic elites of two countries which geographically are as much on the same axis as they are on an adjacent axis (Turkey with the Middle East, Armenia with the Caucasus). Economically, it would be to their countries' mutual advantage for their rapprochement, both

in terms of being trading partners and in terms of needed infrastructure development.⁸

I should also say that besides the professional merit of Armenia and Turkey having new ties of positive relationships, there is also in my proposal a political consideration of *realpolitik*. Armenia has undoubtedly benefited from the benevolent shadow of Russia, and before, of the Soviet Union. There is a very substantial Armenian presence in Russia (nearly that in Armenia itself), which provides benefits to Armenia (such as foreign remittance payments). This relationship is indispensable and should be kept. But the immediate neighbors of Armenia, unless I am sadly mistaken, are not exactly on very cordial terms, either with each other, or with Armenia. One neighbor in particular has territorial ambition for regaining territory, and an extremist nationalist faction within that country might inflame the population sufficiently for a severe armed conflict to break out.

It is imperative, in my judgment, that external powers use a moderating influence to prevent the eruption of a bitter, intense conflict which, despite the bravery of the military, would still be extremely costly in Armenian lives and for Armenian sustained development. Turkey's geopolitical situation is such that it can provide a very important moderating influence in the region. Hence, I view academic exchanges (of faculty and of students) as an important step, perhaps a vital initial step, in providing an important bridge in Armenian-Turkish relations, and thereby a win-win situation.⁹ It may also be a stepping-stone in more amicable economic relationships and the resumption of the normalization process.

Readers of this paper may see it as a naïve rambling of an academic. I realize that 2015 will be the major preoccupation of the Armenian community for at least the next two years. I will also share that concern, but at the same time, as an Armenian and as a social scientist thinking about the future as much as I do research on the bearing of the past on the present, I also ask, "After 2015 what?". National identity justly makes remembrance of the past a duty of the living. It also makes as much of an obligation providing a better future for the present and coming young generations.

Armenia at present is a country high on human resources (with one of the highest literacy rates of nearly 100% for men and women) but having an economy mired in political cronyism, and with a third of its population estimated with a per capita GDP of \$5,500 and living below the poverty line

(according to *The World Factbook* put out by the United States Central Intelligence Agency¹⁰). While young Armenians should be encouraged to complement their training at YSU and other Armenian centers of higher education, they should also find upon their return sufficient opportunities for professional development to deter emigrating permanently in an Armenian “brain drain”.

That, ultimately, is my concern in thinking of new avenues of development for Armenia¹¹.

REFERENCES

1. For example, Edward A. Tiryakian and Ronald Rogowski, eds., *New Nationalisms of the Developed West*, Boston: “Allen & Unwin, 1985; “When is the Nation No Longer?” pp. 55-74 in Mitchell Young, Eric Zuelow and Andreas Sturm, eds., *Nationalism in a Global Era. The Persistence of Nations*. London & New York” Routledge 2007.
2. For the start of the first republic, see the masterpiece of Richard Hovannisian, *The Republic of Armenia. The First Year 1918-1919*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971.
3. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tourism>. Accessed May 29,2013.
4. [http://.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tourism in Armenia](http://.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tourism_in_Armenia).
5. J. John Lennon, and Malcolm Foley, *Dark Tourism*. London: Continuum, 2000. The term refers to guided visits to “dark” sites where violent deaths took place and are remembered.
6. One component of an advanced research center might well be in upgrading agricultural development, since a substantial part of the labor force, in Armenia (44%), Georgia (56%) and Turkey (25%), is engaged in agriculture.
7. The planning of the exchange program might best be undertaken at some neutral site institution, e.g., in Sweden, Germany, or Belgium.
8. Flying from Istanbul to Yerevan, were there direct flights, should be well under an hour, instead of the current lengthy change-over in Tbilisi.
9. For Turkey, to safeguard Armenia’s independence and even to respect the autonomy of the present Nagorno-Karabakh Republic (leaving aside the disputed territory), would win the accolade of the European Union and pave the way for the acceptance of Turkey.
10. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Economy of Armenia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Economy_of_Armenia), accessed 6.6/2013.
11. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Economy of Armenia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Economy_of_Armenia), accessed 6.6/2013.