Year: 2015

The grammar of denial: state, society, and Turkish–Armenian relations

Bayraktar, Seyhan

Abstract: The existing literature on the denial of the Armenian Genocide of 1915 tends to concentrate on either the Turkish state's political practices or civil society's increasing openness to alternative readings of the event. I argue that both approaches reduce denialism to the political practices and defense mechanisms of Turkey by prioritizing the state as the sole agent of genocide denial. Although the state is indeed a dominant actor of denialism, to juxtapose state and society is to overlook the power that rests*in the discourse itself*and its pervasiveness across different—at times even competing—social and political settings.

The Grammar of Denial: State, Society, and Turkish–Armenian Relations

SEYHAN BAYRAKTAR

History Department, University of Zurich, Zurich, Switzerland;
e-mail: seyhan.bayraktar@foeg.uzh.ch

The existing literature on the denial of the Armenian Genocide of 1915 tends to concentrate on either the Turkish state's political practices or civil society's increasing openness to alternative readings of the event. I argue that both approaches reduce denialism to the political practices and defense mechanisms of Turkey by prioritizing the state as the sole agent of genocide denial. Although the state is indeed a dominant actor of denialism, to juxtapose state and society is to overlook the power that rests *in the discourse itself* and its pervasiveness across different—at times even competing—social and political settings.

Recent literature conveys how short sighted it is to attribute denial only to the Turkish state. The fact that descendants of former perpetrators have vivid memories of Armenians being killed by their ancestors has led some to conclude that the "Turkish government is denying a genocide that its own population [in contrast] remembers."[1] Such an equation between social memory and genocide acknowledgement is problematic, however, as is the tendency in recent literature to evaluate the current memory boom about the Armenian Genocide as an indicator of a critical discourse *per se*. Hence, the debate surrounding the denial of the Armenian Genocide tends to neglect the contestedness of the concept of genocide in political discourse and undermines the importance of the victims' almost century-long political struggle for genocide acknowledgement.[2]

My own research on the discourse in Turkey surrounding the Armenian Genocide during "critical discourse moments"[3] between 1973 and 2005 has shown that increased critical discourse does not indicate a paradigmatic shift toward self-critical discourse in which the needs of the victims have priority over national identity.[4] On the contrary, the denial produced by the state and its agencies in the 1970s and 1980s has become much more sophisticated. While the state has adopted new strategies to block international genocide acknowledgements (e.g., proposing a Turkish–Armenian history commission, announcing the restoration of Armenian cultural artifacts, and football diplomacy), discourse frames invented for political purposes in the 1970s and 1980s (i.e., "Armenian terrorism") have proven particularly pervasive. Indeed, not only have they survived over time, but they have also reached an increasingly wide range of social and political actors.

I will elaborate my argument that the denial of the Armenian Genocide has taken a sophisticated turn that determines the boundaries of Turkish–Armenian encounters by giving a brief overview of the different stages of denial and of the structures and key patterns in public and political memory that have dominated the debate on the genocide topic. Most importantly, I will link the discourse to the material context of Turkey's foreign relations, particularly with the European Union (EU) in the

early 2000s when the pressure to address the genocidal past reached an unprecedented peak.

Before doing this, however, I want to clarify some key assumptions of my approach. In studying genocide denial I adopt the poststructuralist position that discourses—memory patterns about the Armenian Genocide in Turkish society and politics—are not epiphenomena in politics but are themselves key in the production and reproduction of power structures. Access to discourse and the control and selection of discursive patterns both stem from and result in power relations.[5] However, following Ole Waever, I soften the understanding of the relationship between discourse and actors as defined in poststructuralist discourse analysis.[6] While the latter assumes that discourses are prior to actors in the sense that subjects do not exist outside discourse, the present study conceptualizes discursive structures as in-between actors who produce, reproduce, or transform them through practice. For the study of the denial of the Armenian Genocide, this means that existing discourse frames about the Armenian Genocide (regardless of their origin) and Turkey's politics of the past together (a) determine the range of possibilities of how to frame the destruction of the Armenians and (b) at the same time are themselves dependent on actors. It is this kind of "linguistic structuration" that allows discourses to change.[7]

Prior to the turn of the millennium—though particularly in the 1970s and 1980s—remembrance of the 1915 genocide occurred almost exclusively as a reaction to external triggers in the form of political pressure. The memory politics of diaspora Armenians (whether militant attacks on Turkish state representatives or political mobilization for recognition of the genocide, particularly in the United States) and international genocide recognition debates not only raised awareness about the genocide worldwide but also made it impossible for Turkey to avoid the topic. Consequently, this phase of Turkish denial is marked by its reactive rather than proactive character.

Two frames played a dominant role in this phase of denialism: first, "Armenian terrorism" became the decisive and *only* explanation for Armenian attacks on Turkish representatives; second, attempts at distinguishing between Armenians in Turkey—"our Armenians"—and "revengeful" Armenians in the diaspora were visible. The need to explicitly differentiate between "our Armenians" and "diaspora Armenians" in the Turkish print media in the 1970s was accompanied by calls to stay cool and not incite another 6–7 September 1955, when state-orchestrated riots in Istanbul targeted the Greek and the non-Muslim population, respectively. In this early phase of the discourse, political encounters between Turks and Armenians in Turkey's public space were nonexistent. Because of its highly vulnerable position, the Armenian community of Turkey remained unseen and did not actively take part in the discourse about its own historical experience and destruction. Instead, the patriarch represented the community in the public arena and, in the instances when Turkish diplomats were killed by Armenians, offered his condolences in its name. This pattern of Turkish–Armenian relations in Turkey, where Armenians were invisible in the public arena, only began to crack around the year 2000.

In the 1980s, denial was institutionalized and professionalized: a special agency called Istihbarat ve Arastirma Müdürlügü (Directorate General of Intelligence and Research) was founded within the Foreign Ministry to coordinate all issues related to the Armenian Genocide and to formulate the state's politics of the past.[8] One of the most effective

strategies of this agency was to frame the "Armenian question" as a problem of *contemporary* terrorism rather than an outcome of Turkey's genocidal past and the absence of justice and restitution.

This strategy of genocide denial proved successful insofar as "Armenian terrorism" survived the period of the 1970s and 1980s when assassinations were actually taking place. More importantly, the frame of Armenian terrorism gained legitimacy over time, since it is invoked not only by state actors and nationalists but also by critical voices promoting Turkish–Armenian dialogue. The following example is highly illustrative, for it shows not only the uncritical use of the frame in the context of Turkish–Armenian relations, but also its apparent acceptability far beyond Turkish state and nationalist circles: as Turkish public intellectuals organized the "Apology Campaign" in 2008, nationalists organized a countercampaign demanding an apology *from* Armenians.[9] Such a reaction—though reversing the perpetrator–victim relationship and confusing historical cause–effect processes—was relatively unsurprising to anyone following the highly tense issue of genocide in Turkey. One of the main organizers of the "Apology Campaign," the well-known public intellectual Baskın Oran, also argued in favor of a public apology by Armenians for the crimes of the Armenian Secret Army of the Liberation of Armenia (ASALA).[10] Oran reasoned that such an apology would have an immense effect on the growing critical awareness in Turkey about the genocide and would contribute to Turkish-Armenian reconciliation. Thus, he equated the need for Turkey to come to terms with the Armenian Genocide, a foundational event in the creation of modern Turkey, with Armenians' coming to terms with the violence of a terrorist organization. The equation of different instances of violence involves the risk of them justifying one another. In the case of the Armenian Genocide, such an equation is but another indicator of how even the most progressive Turkish actors use the state-invented denial frame of "Armenian terrorism" without taking into account Turkey's lack of any constructive politics of the past and the lasting effects of the genocidal process on Armenians.

The years 2000–2002 were a period of transition during which the "Armenian issue" gradually became part of everyday political debate in Turkey. The main difference between this stage of denial and the previous one was that the destruction of the Armenians—as well as that of other groups in the Ottoman Empire, such as the Assyrians—was increasingly dealt with independently of *specific* and *concrete* external triggers. In this phase Turkey also began to revise its politics of the past, for its conventional approach to the problem, centered on security and terrorism, had not halted international recognition of the genocide. France's genocide resolution in 2001 led Turkey to rethink its politics vis-à-vis the Republic of Armenia. After having practiced a politics of putting pressure on Armenia by isolating it, Ankara started a cautious rapprochement by encouraging low-profile contacts on the level of civil society and easing visa regulations for citizens of the Republic of Armenia. In so doing, Turkey aimed at bypassing the political efforts of the Armenian diaspora. However, neither the politics of isolation nor the politics of rapprochement produced the results that Turkey sought: they did not prevent further genocide acknowledgements or halt the Republic of Armenia from advocating for such acknowledgements.

The phase in which the Armenian Genocide became part of everyday political communication in Turkey reached a preliminary peak in 2005, which was both the ninetieth

anniversary of the genocide as well as the most critical year in Turkey's EU accession process—when the EU would decide whether to start accession talks with Turkey. After Turkey had become an official EU candidate in 1999, an intense debate started in some EU member states, first and foremost France and Germany, over the cultural European-ability of Turkey. In the context of this debate, Turkey's problematic relationship with the genocide was crucial for critics convinced that the country was not European enough. On the institutional level, the European Parliament, which approves the membership of candidate countries, reconfirmed its genocide resolution from 1987 at critical junctures, such as in 2000, 2002, and 2005, thereby maintaining high pressure on Turkey. Hence, between 1999 and 2005 acknowledgement of the Armenian Genocide or self-critical reflection on the past became informal criteria for Turkey's EU entry.

Against the backdrop of profuse discussion of the Armenian Genocide in European countries, the Turkish government made tactical concessions to counter the international pressure.[11] A few weeks before the ninetieth anniversary of the genocide, Prime Minister Erdogan contacted Armenian President Kocharian, suggesting a joint Armenian-Turkish history commission. The government also announced the restoration of Armenian cultural and religious monuments. The renovation of the Holy Cross Church in Lake Van, for example, was announced as a step both to improve Armenian–Turkish relations and to counter international genocide acknowledgements.[12] With these policy initiatives Turkey achieved two things: it signalled openness in terms of the contested history of 1915; and, at the same time, it depoliticized the issue by delegating it to so-called "experts". This new strategy was applauded internationally. The Independent Commission on Turkey, for example, a group of high-ranking EU politicians, welcomed Turkey's move while criticizing Armenia for not responding positively to it.

The signs of an opening were further fueled by breaking news in 2005: three of Turkey's most renowned universities announced the organization of an "alternative Armenian conference" that would step outside the confines of the Turkish nationalist narrative on the Armenian Genocide. Within a few days the organizers—representing the established Turkish academia—met with major opposition and political pressure. In a parliamentary speech the justice minister Cemil Çiçek accused them of "backstabbing the nation." As a consequence, the hosting university decided to postpone the conference. The second attempt at realizing the conference also encountered major obstacles when a court decided to halt it. This time, however, the same justice minister who had criticized the conference as a traitorous project provided the necessary clue for how to circumvent the court's decision, namely by changing the location of the conference. Other leading members of the government, such as Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Foreign Minister Abdullah Gül, also spoke in favor of the conference. Behind the scenes the government pushed for its realization before the EU summit in October 2005, where the EU would decide whether to start formal accession talks with Turkey. With this backing of the government, the conference finally took place on 24–25 September 2005. The timing of the conference is already a solid indicator that it served Turkey's interests and its EU bid.

However, in their public statements, the organizers of the conference also stressed exactly the same point: that the conference would ultimately serve Turkey and "be one of the most significant steps taken in our country on the path . . . toward democracy."[13] In a joint declaration they stressed that the "demonstration of how Turkey actually contains . . . a rich multiplicity of thoughts would be . . . to the utmost benefit of

Turkey."[14] Hence, the organizers and supporters of the conference not only strongly rejected the accusation that they were traitors and harming Turkey, they also reversed it. Ali Bayramoglu, who was among the vocal supporters of the conference in 2005 and one of the four initiators of the Apology Campaign in 2008, pointed to the political damage that the cancellation of the conference had caused, particularly in the light of Turkey–EU relations, and asked, "who is the [real] traitor" here?[15]

In this sense, the counterdiscourse of Turkish progressives itself relied on a strongly nationalist logic and rhetoric. These vocal actors surrounding the conference did not challenge the need to come to terms with the past as such and *beyond* the question of its possible benefits for Turkey. Such shortcomings of the 2005 controversy over the "alternative Armenian conference" and the denial of the Armenian Genocide, respectively, have been largely ignored so far. Instead, the conference is predominantly referred as a pathbreaking moment in Turkish–Armenian relations and in the coming to terms process of Turkey in particular.

Meanwhile, since 2005 Turkish–Armenian encounters have considerably intensified on a variety of levels. We have witnessed an interim, tension-fraught rapprochement between the two states (soccer diplomacy, Turkish–Armenian protocols, etc.) as well as numerous encounters between Turks and Armenians from Turkey and from the diaspora. On the occasion of the one hundredth anniversary of the genocide in April 2005, a remarkable number of diaspora Armenians, together with public intellectuals, human rights activists, and civil societal organizations from Turkey, chose to commemorate the genocide at different sites in Turkey. These joint memory efforts and the unprecedented wave of public commemoration of the genocide within Turkey carried particularly strong symbolic vibes, suggesting a new quality in Turkish–Armenian civil societal relations. Paradoxically enough, although such encounters are important, they do not necessarily signify a meaningful confrontation with the past on the part of the successors of the perpetrators.[16] Turkey's rhetoric around the time of the centennial became, if anything, more extreme in its negationism. Yet the form, content, and messages surrounding various commemorations revealed how difficult it is to confront the sophistication of denial and pave the way for reconciliation that addresses critical issues such as justice and restitution.

Therefore, it remains to be seen to what extent these encounters between Turks and Armenians from the Diaspora are based on the same language and a common understanding of the historical—and ultimately contemporary—dynamics of Turkish–Armenian relations. Taking into consideration that the 2005 "alternative Armenian conference" has never been questioned in terms of its assumed breaking effects—least of all by the organizing academics and their supporters—it seems that Turkish–Armenian encounters, dialogue, and reconciliation are but a black box. Once opened, this box will likely reveal that the feel-good, symbolic vibes of such encounters have overshadowed the fact that genocide denial has adjusted well to memory, commemoration, and the vision of Armenian–Turkish civil societal coresistance to such denial.

NOTES

[1]Uğur Ü. Üngör, "Lost in Commemoration: The Armenian Genocide in Memory and Identity," *Patterns of Prejudice* 48 (2014): 147–66.

[2]Seyhan Bayraktar "Remembering the Armenian Genocide in Contemporary Turkey," *Testimony between History and Memory* 120 (2015): 61–69.

[3]Paul Chilton, "Metaphor, Euphemism and the Militarization of Language," *Current Research on Peace and Violence* 10 (1987): 7–19.

[4]Seyhan Bayraktar, *Politik und Erinnerung: Der Diskurs über den Armeniermord in der Türkei zwischen Nationalismus und Europäisierung* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2010). This essay refers mainly to the results of research for this book.

[5]Jenny Edkins, "Poststructuralism," in *International Relations Theory for the 21st Century: An Introduction*, ed. Martin Griffiths (New York: Routledge, 2007), 88–98.

[6]Ole Waever, "Diskursive Approaches," in *European Integration Theory*, ed. Anje Wiener and Thomas Diez (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 197–215.

[7]Thomas Diez, "'Speaking Europe': The Politics of Integration Discourse," *Journal of European Public Policy* 6 (1999): 598–613.

[8]See also Jennifer Dixon, "Changing the State's Story: Continuity and Change in Official Narratives of Dark Pasts" (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2011).

[9]For two seminal analyses of the Apology Campaign, see Ayda Erbal, "Mea Culpas, Negotiations, Apologias: Revisiting the 'Apology' of Turkish Intellectuals," in *Reconciliation, Civil Society, and the Politics of Memory: Transnational Initiatives in the 20th and 21st Century*, ed. Birgit Schwelling (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2012), 51–94; and Marc Mamigonian, "Commentary on the Turkish Apology Campaign," *The Armenian Weekly*, 21 April 2009, accessed 6 February 2015, http://armenianweekly.com.

[10]Baskın Oran, "İğneli Fıçı Nöbeti ve Onuru," 8 February 2009, accessed 15 June 2015, http://www.radikal.com.tr/radikal2/igneli_fici_nobeti_ve_onuru-920692.

[11]On the concept of "tactical concessions," see Thomas Risse, Steven C. Ropp, and Kathryn Sikkink, *The Power of Human Rights: International Norms and Domestic Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

[12]Bilgin Ayata, "Tolerance as a European Norm or an Ottoman Practice? An Analysis of the Turkish Public Debates on the (Re)Opening of an Armenian Church in the Context of Turkey's EU Candidacy and Neo-Ottoman Revival," *KFK Working Paper Series* 41 (2012).

[13]For the English version of the joint declaration by the organizers and participants of the conference, see *Azad Hye*, 28 May 2005, accessed 8 July 2015, http://azad-hye.blogspot.com/2005/05/joint-declaration-of-conference.html.

[14]Ibid.

[15]Ali Bayramoğlu, "Kim Hain?," *Yeni Şafak*, 26 May 2005.

[16]See Talin Suciyan's analysis of how commemorations and memory activism have evolved in Turkey since 2010, and particularly her critical discussion of the one-hundredth anniversary commemorations: "Toplumsal Anma Pratikleri Şekillenirken, Bölüm II: İstanbul 24 Nisan 2015," Azad Alik, 21 June 2015, accessed 8 July 2015, https://azadalik.wordpress.com/2015/06/21/toplumsal-anma-pratikleri-sekillenirken-bolum-ii-istanbul-24-nisan-2015/.