

Come to Move Mountains! Diaspora and Development in a Transnational Age

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Abstract

Second and third generation Armenian-Americans are no longer attracted to Armenia simply in order to reestablish their ethnic roots. Rather they increasingly seek to interact with the country as part of a much broader cosmopolitan movement that both revitalizes their ties to their historic homeland, but links them to a transnational movement that promotes diversity, democracy, environmental sustainability and tolerance.

Evolving Relations between Diaspora and Homeland in Armenia

One of the key features identifying members of a 'diaspora' is their continuing attachment to the homeland, regardless of whether it is an imagined or a real country of exodus. Much has been written about the ideals and paradigms of the diasporic identity, but there have been fewer investigations of the ways diasporic people practice this kind of attachment to their homeland in a transnational age.

Attachment to the homeland can take many different forms and meanings. It can be expressed in the construction of an imagined community with a sacred place reserved for worshipping the land of exodus, in public activities of political associations with territorial claims, in repatriation movements, in artistic expressions of nostalgic longing for home or in simply hanging an image of the homeland in the living room.

In this article, I discuss a new form of diasporic interaction with the homeland by identifying the diasporic homecoming practice as a transnational activity with a significant social and political impact. Current trends suggest that the classical form of homecoming as return migration and repatriation is losing its ability to attract second and third generation Armenian diasporics. New ways of engaging with the homeland within global social movements are emerging and seem to play an increasing role in the reconfiguration of relationships between diaspora and the homeland.

I argue that along with a parochial nostalgic longing for a homeland and ethnic soil, members of the US Armenian diaspora reconfigure their attitude to their homeland by introducing a new set of ideas and practices embedded in cosmopolitan 'future projects'. Exploring transnational engagement with the postsocialist Armenia among second- and third-generation US Armenians, I inquire into the linkages between diasporic homecoming and cosmopolitanism, a perspective that has not received enough attention in the literature or in local and global politics. I use the term 'diasporic cosmopolitanism' to mean a kind of simultaneity of ethnic closure and openness to the world and global issues that

goes beyond identification with a national project and ethnic repatriation.

Diaspora Efforts to Develop Armenia

With the end of the Cold War, today there is a new interest¹ in the Republic of Armenia among members of the old Armenian diaspora. Since the 1990s, as Armenia gained its independence, members of Western diasporic communities have been arriving in Armenia as tourists, volunteers and NGO activists. The point is that newcomers arrive to Armenia not only to see the sacred Mount Ararat or to learn Armenian in a 'holy land', but rather with the aim to 'develop Armenia'. The temporal visits can be framed in terms of diasporic homecoming or a kind of 'ethnic reunion', but in a very specific way. As Armine Ishkanian rightly noted, the myth of return and patriotism in the 21st century appears to be weakening, as most diaspora Armenians prefer to interact with Armenia transnationally and not as a one-way process. Travelers and temporary migrants prefer to talk more about the transfer of ideas, cross-cultural exchange of materials, and know-how to a developing land, often making reference to their broader global aspirations. This notion seems to be stronger than the ideas of permanent resettlement and the dream of being buried in an imagined native soil. Moreover, Armenian American diasporic visitors have no local dimension or intimate knowledge of a particular genealogy, place, or village in Armenia. Directed to a territory that is not the ancestral homeland, the territory of Turkey from which their grandparents actually originated, many of the second and third generation diasporic Armenians combine 'homeland imaginaries' and 'ancestral tourism' with an

¹ After WWII many diasporic Armenians (100,000) were attracted by the repatriation policy in Soviet Armenia, known as *nerghakht*, Stalin's campaign to repopulate the regions of Kars and Ardahan which were to be acquired from Turkey. A formal claim to Kars and Ardahan was made by the Kremlin to the Turkish ambassador in Moscow, but was dropped in 1949 with no border change. The dramatic experience of the return program (deportation of newcomers to Siberia, precarious life conditions, unemployment) disillusioned diasporic Armenians and created a political rift between the diaspora and Soviet Armenia.

assertion that to reclaim Armenian soil is to contribute to the environment of the entire planet and its inhabitants. Currently, members of the Western diaspora are increasingly involved in diverse forms of international and global engagement. A search for roots and identity drives financial investments.

It is not surprising that unlike so many migratory transnational networks that are built on a foundation of individual informal ties of kinship and remittances to family members, members of the 'external diaspora' build homeland ties primarily through formal NGOs and international organizations. For example, many Armenian Americans invest more of their private donations and individual energy in the development of roads and hospitals and the revitalization of museums and churches in Armenia than in supporting local households. The idea of traveling to Armenia not as a tourist, but rather as a volunteer to support impoverished society is increasingly popular among young creative Armenian-Americans.

'Come move mountains': Newcomers in Yerevan

Along with dozens of visible, larger non-profit organizations working in the education and health sectors in Armenia, there are two homecoming target-oriented diasporic organizations: Armenian Volunteer Corps (AVC) and Birthright Armenia. Founded in 2001, both organizations are engaged in a kind of 'homecoming project' for young diasporics in a particular way. Both volunteer organizations share the mission of affording the diasporic youth an opportunity to contribute to local development through professional work. Their specific goal is to support volunteer activities in Armenia by those who grew up in Western countries and who have at least one Armenian grandparent. Between 2007 and 2009, more than 200 male and female volunteers from the US, Canada, France, and Australia between the ages of 21 and 34 went to Armenia for periods varying from three months to two years. The number is growing.

Some scholars compare Armenian diasporic inspirations and experiences with the Jewish case, but the Armenian engagement with the homeland should not be equated with the Jewish Zionist movement. In contrast to the Jewish Zionist project and its relationship to Israel, the Armenian diaspora does not have an ideological foundation for supporting Armenia as there is with Zionism. The ties between the homeland and the diaspora are relatively weak and the diaspora's support for Armenia is less institutionalized and less 'strategic', but more individualistic and project-specific. On one hand, the Armenian volunteer work may speak of a desire to 'serve to the nation'; but their efforts are not

solely encompassed by this nationalist type of motivation. Without nationalistic slogans, its goal is empowerment and a desire to join with those around the world who work to save the planet. This form of cosmopolitan 'bifocality' links the fate of the nation to that of all humanity. Many of the young people involved in development projects in Armenia are informed by global ideas such as commitment to the protection of human rights and tolerance towards others. Politically, AVC statements differ significantly from the goals of nationalist diasporic Armenians who identify themselves as 'Dashnaks'. In contrast to traditional Dashnak's claims to annex lands in Eastern Anatolia inside Turkey and to establish an Armenian state, the AVC recruits young volunteers through a humanitarian rhetoric and focuses on the territory of the Republic of Armenia. Explaining his drive to settle in Armenia within the official AVC slogan 'Come Move Mountains', one 30-year-old male volunteer from Boston emphasized: 'There are many things to change here. You know, there is a problem of poverty, infrastructure. There is a problem of corruption'. (Yerevan, on May 7, 2005).

Although the imaginaries of home and practices of a diasporic 'trip to the homeland' are framed in terms of remembering ancestral origins, these trips take on new dimensions. The contemporary Armenian programs challenge the ethnic idea of homecoming through cosmopolitan practices framed as 'progress', 'democracy' and 'global civic society'. That is to say, the current Armenian homecomings today not only comprise anti-modern, de-globalized repatriation policy, but also modern long- and short-term visits, work contracts, development-aid programs, and social projects across borders.

Globalizing Ethnic Nature?

Another example standing for the historical evolution of the Armenian diaspora and a cosmopolitanization of the attitude towards the homeland in Armenia is related to the activities of the non-profit organization, the Armenian Tree Project. Founded in 1994 in Watertown (Boston, USA) the ATP sends a large amount of capital to the greater Yerevan area, establishing nurseries, planting trees, and starting up village projects. The local office's activities in Yerevan are divided into three main tree-planting sites: community sites in the city, developing nurseries, and supporting impoverished villages with a high percentage of refugees from Azerbaijan. Founded in Yerevan by Carolin Mugar, a second-generation Armenian-American from the village of Kharpet in Anatolia, the tree planting activities are financed by generous donations from a significant number of second-generation Armenian-Americans. At the same time, ATP has received support not only from a clus-

ter of US Armenian family foundations, but also from international organizations such as Conservation International and the World Wildlife Fund. Armenian-American life cycle events, such as birthdays, anniversaries and deaths, take on a new transnational dimension as they are redefined as opportunities to contribute to the organization. Increasingly, for example, diasporics are donating to ATP in order to commemorate the death of a family member. Another transnational technique was introduced as the 'Green Certificate,' which was presented to donors confirming their sponsorship of tree plantings in Armenia. These activities among donors include the emerging practice of pilgrimage to the sites of sponsored trees and nurseries in Armenia.

The tree-planting culture is helping to diversify the typical Armenian image of the homeland, which has been focused on the holy Mount Ararat. The ATP's official logo design is three triangular green trees, which is similar to the design incorporated into ornamental Oriental rugs. Flyers, websites, newsletters, and donation certificates are identified by an image of three evergreen trees without any specific mountain images. Both the mountain and the trees are symbols of nature. But unlike the mountain, which is associated with a particular longing for a past, a tree represents social qualities, such as vitality, cultural universality, and a powerful orientation towards the future.

The rhetoric of the Armenian Tree Project tries to create a new dimension for envisioning a mutually acceptable future that diminishes the tensions between 'us—*spjurk*' and 'them—*Hayastantsy*' via global issues. In 1998, the Armenia Tree Project jointly initiated a ceremonial event to mark Earth Day in Armenian villages. The date, 22 April, is very close to the traditional day for volunteer civic work initiated by the Soviet authorities in order to celebrate Lenin's birthday. This day, which was observed among all Soviet institutions, schools, and

enterprises by cleaning the territory around the organization's location and then planting a tree, has been transformed into the new context of a global Earth Day in Armenia.

The ATP newsletter from the spring of 2007 states: 'We will use trees to improve the standard of living of Armenians and to protect the global environment'. This quotation indicates that planting global trees simultaneously brings to mind an ethnicized connotation based on the typical diasporic search for roots and is also reconceptualized within broader global frameworks. By positioning actions within a movement to sustain and protect the planet, the act of tree planting in a specific place is transformed into a form of creative cosmopolitan discourse. Again, in contrast to the Zionist project which is characterized by a monocultural use and physical occupation of the land through planting pine trees promoting an ethnically driven security agenda (Braverman 2009), the Armenian Tree Project in both donation techniques and in the acts of greening the landscape is not fixed on the ecological symbolism of a particular tree, but rather emphasizes Armenia's biodiversity in its global context and sees Armenia as part of a larger region—the Caucasus. As a part of international projects, the ATP tree planting is linked to a commitment to biodiversity, which is made explicit in the curriculum for environmental education published in English and Armenian.

Thus, the idea and practice of engaging with the homeland among second- and third-generation Western diasporic Armenians in the Republic of Armenia is based less on regaining a lost intimacy and a place of origin, but rather on the desire to connect a specific territory to the rest of the world by 'developing the country' in democratic ways. These diasporic networks contribute to social and political changes, in particular in the lands classified as the 'Third World', by planting ideas about environmental sustainability and civil society.

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