

Who Defines the Armenians?

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THE Armenians of America are not a large community, nor are they an old community. Their presence in this country, apart from individual immigrants, dates to the early decades of the century.¹ Within living memory these people were dispersed from their homeland and dumped under emergency circumstances on this foreign shore largely without identity, profession, allies, resources, or place. Such an experience is disruptive and disorienting, to say the least. Such a group can never be what it was before, and in America, with its assimilationist ethic, these immigrants were left without even a *millet* to impose a definition. Whatever Armenians are and whatever they are to become has to be understood within the context of the American experience.

There is a school of thought, certainly an insightful and respected school, which focuses upon religious and intellectual traditions and upon the role of intellectuals — professors, writers, historians, clergy — in shaping and defining peoples and political groups.² While acknowledging that intellectuals and intellectual traditions make their contribution, this essay will present an alternative perspective, one which suggests that contextual and political-economic forces are major components of group evolution. Identity and self-concept, while certainly linked to such factors as history, culture, and religion, are primarily an outgrowth of the circumstances in which people live and

¹Avakian indicates that in 1890 there were 2,000 Armenians in the United States. In the next ten years 20,000 arrived, and by 1914 the total was 100,000. Arra Avakian, *The Armenians in America* (Minneapolis, 1977), pp. 38-47. A breakdown of Armenian immigrants by class and other characteristics is included in M. Vartan Malcom, *The Armenians in America* (Boston, 1919).

²A book which makes a good case for intellectuals as a driving force in history is James Etmekjian, *The French Influence on the Western Armenian Renaissance 1843-1915* (New York, 1964).

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Cover illustration: Three generations of an Armenian family: The Kirkyasharians, the Reverend Krikor and Mariam holding their grandchildren, Erzerum, 1914. *Courtesy of Project SAVE, Ruth Thomasian, Director, and with the permission of Arsine Aharonian of Belmont, Massachusetts who in the photograph is held by her grandmother.*

exist. Paying disproportionate attention to intellectual traditions can over-emphasize unique or idiosyncratic factors and make it difficult to see events in perspective. We must recognize that from a comparative viewpoint, the Armenian experience in America is not as unique as it sometimes seems. While every group has its own particular history and characteristics, certain general patterns of group evolution seem to repeat from society to society and from country to country. To understand this better, let us specify the most important of these patterns, and then discuss them as they apply to the Armenian experience in America.

SOME COMPARATIVE PATTERNS

The first generalization worth noting is that where ethnic or national minority groups are concerned, group boundaries are not fixed or immutable. Who is identified with a group changes across time. Similar peoples may be absorbed, peripheral elements may be lost, and individuals are added or sometimes fall away. Lord Bryce, in his well-known travelogue, mentions villages where Armenian-speaking Turks lived among Armenians virtually as Armenians.³ If the boundary between Turk and Armenian was a meaningful one in the late nineteenth century Ottoman Empire, we must look beyond simplistic labelling to find the dynamic of that meaning.

In their excellent and important study of caste patterns in India, Rudolph and Rudolph speak of tendencies for groups to undergo fusion (absorption of similar elements) and fission (separation from dissimilar elements).⁴ Their studies indicate that these processes occur when a group is internally differentiated in terms of class, education, income, and other such characteristics. Because ethnic-national identity is sometimes a factor in the competition for jobs or resources, a politics of numbers often becomes important.⁵ Groups which are large or diffuse tend to separate into more favored and less favored elements; groups which are so small that the members cannot effectively help each other fuse with other groups through social, cultural, business, and ultimately familial linkages. In the case of low status groups which are upwardly mobile, there is a tendency for group boundaries to

³James Bryce, *Transcaucasia and Ararat. Being Notes of a Vacation Tour in the Autumn of 1876*. (London, 1896).

⁴Lloyd I. Rudolph and Susanne Hoeber Rudolph, *The Modernity of Tradition: Political Development in India* (Chicago, 1967). See especially Part One.

⁵Many works dealing with this subject tend to focus upon group interaction in an existing situation rather than upon the dynamic of group change across time. They are not less valuable for that approach. See the following: Arend Lijphart, *Democracy in Plural Societies: A Comparative Exploration* (New Haven, 1977); Cynthia H. Enloe, *Ethnic Conflict and Political Development* (Boston, 1973); Alvin Rabushka and Kenneth A. Shepsle, *Politics in Plural Societies: A Theory of Democratic Instability* (Columbus, Ohio, 1972); Charles Anderson et al., *Issues of Political Development* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1967).

be redefined so as to leave out those former group members who seem unable or unwilling to adapt to the values of the dominant stratum. In India, this means abandoning or dis-identifying those who still engage in "polluting" occupations and do not forsake the cultural styles of the lower castes. In America, where there are no castes, we would think more in terms of separation according to occupational groupings, educational characteristics, residential patterns, entertainment styles, patterns of speech, and mode of religious expression.⁶

The critical point to keep in mind is that ethnic-national identity is dynamic and is often dependent upon contextual-situational factors which can change across time.

A second generalization which emerges from the case literature is that the defining characteristics and concerns of a group also change across time. Let us take an example from the American experience to illustrate this pattern. In each historical era a people select from their traditions certain elements with which they redefine themselves in light of their current experience. This definition changes as frequently as the makeup and concerns of the group. For example, there was a time in American history — a time of tension, social conflict, and great insecurity — when the single most important verse in the Bible was the old Mosaic admonition, "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live."⁷ Today few are even aware that that passage exists and it is hard to imagine a sermon preached on the subject. The Bible, with its diversity, offers innumerable alternatives to those who wish to define Christian. Each definition in a sense is valid and correct, but the basis of validity lies not in some abstract orthodoxy but in its appropriateness to the people of the day.

This leads to a third important point: when seeking those factors which most influence the redefinition of a group, we must remember that all peoples, including ethnic or national groups, exist "in history," to use a Marxist phrase.⁸ We are shaped both by changes which are occurring within our society and by changes which are occurring across societies. As the conditions or circumstances in which

⁶A thoughtful discussion of assimilation and group identity in contemporary America is Milton M. Gordon, *Human Nature, Class, and Ethnicity* (New York, 1978). Gordon suggests that assimilation is not a single process but seven different processes which sometimes occur independent of each other.

⁷The verse is Exodus 22:18. A good scientific analysis of the era is Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed: The Social Origins of Witchcraft* (Cambridge, Mass., 1974).

⁸Marx's views are found in several essays. Two of the most important revolve around his debates with Bruno Bauer and are entitled "The Jewish Question" and "The Capacity of Present-day Jews and Christians to Become Free," included along with other religion-related essays in T. B. Bottomore (ed.), *Karl Marx Early Writings* (New York, 1964). Marx's ideas on this subject are important enough that the interested reader might want to look at two additional works: Jerrold Seigel, *Marx's Fate: The Shape of a Life* (Princeton, 1978) and Julius Carlebach, *Karl Marx and the Radical Critique of Judaism* (Boston, 1978).

we live change, so do we, and to the extent that we are different from what we were, our perspectives and our values are also different. Our religious leaders like to focus upon those things which are eternal and tell us that some things never change, and indeed they are correct in that. But while certain aspects of faith or tradition never change, the people who adhere to that faith or tradition do change, and their national or ethnic identities change with them.

In his famous essays on religion, Karl Marx suggested that it is not sufficient to look at the "sabbath" worshipper in order to understand a faith. We must also examine the worshipper as he or she exists in the secular world. Marx went so far as to suggest that the root essence of a faith is to be found in the secular life of the believers. Values, identities, and perspectives, he argued, are largely the outgrowth of our daily lives.⁹

While we may agree or disagree with Marx's particular perspective on religion, his basic point — identity as an outgrowth of the objective conditions of our day-to-day existence — is one which is widely supported in many non-Marxist studies.¹⁰ If we are to understand the essential dynamic of group identity and group transformation, we must look beyond those things which are "traditional" and seek our answer in the secular-political world.

THE CASE OF THE ARMENIANS

With these things said, let us turn to the case of the Armenians in America. A common estimate of the number of Armenians in the United States is 500,000, a figure which many observers suspect will decline in the future, partially because of assimilation.¹¹ For the sake of example, let us assume that in twenty years we return and discover

⁹Marx, "The Capacity of Present-day Jews and Christians to Become Free," *op. cit.*

¹⁰For example, Libaridian points out in discussing Armenian self-images in the late Ottoman period that what it meant to be an Armenian in Istanbul was much different from what it meant to be an Armenian in mountainous Zeytun or in the rural provinces. When certain intellectuals during that time tried to transform these various self-images through the propagation of a revolutionary ideology, that ideology remained "a vague concept" until "the dynamics of change on the individual level" caught up with the concept and validated it through experience. While Libaridian's emphasis is quite different from that of this essay, at this point the two seem to converge. See Gerard Libaridian, "The Changing Armenian Self-Image in the Ottoman Empire: Rayahs and Revolutionaries" in Richard G. Hovannisian (ed.), *The Armenian Image in History and Literature* (Malibu, Cal., 1981), p. 163. Several of the other essays (12 in all) in that volume might also be of interest to readers.

¹¹Andrew Greeley addresses the question of loss of religious identity in *The Denominational Society. A Sociological Approach to Religion in America* (Glenview, Ill., 1972), Ch. 11. The Armenian case is discussed in Aghop Der Karabetian and Emma Oshagan, "Ethnic Orientations of Armenians in Lebanon," *Armenian Review*, 2(1977):164-175 and in two other articles by Der Karabetian alone, "Armenian Identity: Comparative and Context-Bound," *Armenian Review*, 1(1981):25-31 and "Relation of Two Cultural Identities of Armenian-Americans," *Psychological Reports*, (1980):123-128.

the future will be increasingly associated with certain privileged classes and certain privileged neighborhoods.

By now the reader will see the significance (and one hopes, the logic) of the earlier statement that group identities and boundaries are not fixed. Armenianness is defined by what Armenians are; and what Armenians are is shifting constantly. A Jewish sage in the 1700s said, "Judaism does not make the Jews; the Jews make Judaism." As Jews shifted from peasant villagers in Eastern Europe to factory workers in late nineteenth century Russia to professionals in modern America, Judaism, which reflects the perspectives of those people who call themselves Jews, changed.¹² Max Weber, the German sociologist, pointed out that as Europe moved from peasant feudalism to urban capitalism, Christianity shifted from hierarchical top-dominated Catholicism, to locally controlled individualistic Protestantism.¹³ When a class shift occurs within a group, the nature of the group is redefined and its collective identity — religious, ethnic, or national — changes. Class perspective and group perspective are closely linked and must be compatible or else the group will tend to split or shrink in size to bring about that compatibility. This means that as Armenians (defined by the classes or elements who dominate their organizations) become more professional-business-managerial, those Armenians who are factory workers or lower-level clerical people should feel increasingly uneasy, and should be disproportionately likely to fall away from a redefined Armenianness which they feel excludes them.

Armenians in America thus face a prospect common to many small ethnic or national groups in other societies: there are forces at work which would impel them toward homogenization in economic and class characteristics so that they would ultimately be transformed from a community with a wide range of educational, class, economic, and social perspectives into what one scholar calls a "people-class."¹⁴

In *Passage to Ararat*, Michael Arlen encounters Armenian history for the first time and reads of Armenian warriors. He pauses and asks, "When did they stop being warriors and start being traders or rug merchants?"¹⁵ Perhaps we should pause also. While it is not easy to generalize about whole peoples, it is likely that had we done a socio-

¹²A standard history of the Jews is Abram Leon Sachar, *A History of The Jews* (New York, 1930).

¹³Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York, 1958).

¹⁴Abram Leon, *The Jewish Question: A Marxist Interpretation* (New York, 1970). This is a theoretical case study of Jewish history using what is sometimes called a materialist perspective. Gordon finds a similar pattern in American society which he somewhat apologetically calls "ethclass." According to his research, the fusion of ethnicity, class, region, and urban-rural residence is so complete that ethnic identity cannot be meaningfully separated from the other characteristics. He calls this fusion "the essential fact of the subsociety in America," *op. cit.*, chapter 4, especially pp. 134-136.

¹⁵Michael J. Arlen, *Exiles/Passage to Ararat* (New York, 1970), p. 102.

economic profile of Armenia during the "warrior" era and another during the "rug merchant" era, we would discover that the typical Armenian was neither. Probably most Armenians were what they had always been: simple farmers, living in isolated villages, and in many ways not all that different from simple farmers living in isolated villages in other countries or at other times.¹⁶ History records that in a certain era Armenians were warriors or rug merchants or architects or intellectuals because those dominant visible influential elements within Armenian society defined Armenian in their own image. This ability to define comes not out of their heads (does an Armenian rug merchant write books on what it means to be an Armenian?) but out of their existence. Armenian is what individual Armenians are. Even more, it is what those most influential Armenians are, for it is they who define Armenianness by controlling the organized structures through which Armenian individuals manifest their collective identity.¹⁷

For those who remember fondly the Armenian community of the past, these words may be distressing. What they suggest is that Armenian identity in the United States will become increasingly an outgrowth of certain perspectives found in certain metropolitan regions and in certain classes and neighborhoods within those regions. Simultaneously, Armenians in other lands will be undergoing equally significant transformations, diverging according to national and class patterns which are different from those being experienced in America. Pre-genocide Armenian culture, which was rooted in an entirely different society and an entirely different set of experiences, will inevitably become a thing of the past, consciously maintained as a residual artifact, but basically alien and external to those Armenians who now inhabit a different world. It is not even too risky to predict that the Armenianness of twenty years hence will be alien and distant from the Armenianness which exists today, as the essence of what it is to be an Armenian shifts and evolves. This of course is neither good

¹⁶Christopher Walker introduces his excellent history of Armenia with exactly this point, although his interpretation of why Armenians were seen as non-peasants is quite different from that presented here. *Armenia: The Survival of a Nation* (New York, 1980).

¹⁷We should not fail to recognize that one of those structures which the dominant classes control may well be that structure which we call "intellectuals." While we can imagine few merchants writing books, we can easily imagine merchants subsidizing a press or funding a university chair or a fellowship program. As Gramsci wrote, "Every social class, coming into existence on the original basis of an essential function in the world of economic production, creates with itself, organically, one or more groups of intellectuals who give it homogeneity and consciousness of its function not only in the economic field but in the social and political field as well." The point to remember is that under most circumstances the intellectual tradition grows out of or at least reflects socio-economic realities. The quote is from Antonio Gramsci, "The Formation of Intellectuals," in *The Modern Prince and Other Writings* (New York, 1957), p. 118.

nor bad from the point of view of scholarly analysis. But to those Armenians — intellectuals, clergy, historians, or even parents — who hope to shape and define Armenianness according to some conceptual model, perhaps rooted in the images and values and modes of behavior of the past or even the present, it constitutes an almost overwhelming barrier. ■

The Patriarchal Armenian Family System: 1914

Florence Mazian

Introduction

There is a body of literature in cross-cultural family research which describes the family in almost every culture. However, there has been no major analysis of the traditional Armenian family system anywhere. This gap in the research regarding Armenian culture is addressed herein with an analysis of the Armenian family system in 1914. The goal of this paper is to determine whether the traditional Armenian family system was patriarchal or democratic.

Patriarchal family systems have a long history. The early Roman and ancient Hebrew families exemplified patriarchies. Rome, from its inception in 753 B.C. until the close of the Punic Wars in 202 B.C., had the strongest patriarchy about which we have knowledge. Since, at that time, women were not legal citizens, a husband was responsible for his wife's crimes and could punish her as he chose. Under certain conditions, he could even kill her. The father's power over his children, which extended throughout his lifetime, was called *potestas*. A newborn infant would be presented to the father for him to decide whether the child should live or die. The father could banish his children from the country, sell them into slavery, or kill them. He was the priest of ancestor worship and was the only legal person in the family. He owned all property.¹

The Hebrews began to develop agriculture and settle in towns by about the twelfth century before Christ. At that time until the period of Roman domination after the first century A.D., they also had a strong patriarchy,² and women were under the control of one or more

¹Gerald R. Leslie, *The Family in Social Context* (New York, 1979), pp. 158-159.

²Stuart A. Queen and Robert W. Habenstein, *The Family in Various Cultures* (New York, 1974), p. 154.