

Rethinking Armenian Studies

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Past, Present, and Future

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The Role of Organizations, Institutions, and Research Centers: 3

Gerard J. Libaridian

Let me begin with a clarification. I am not the most qualified person to discuss the Zoryan Institute as it is today or as it has been since 1990. I was asked to discuss the role of the Zoryan as an institution and its relationship to Armenian Studies. I will limit my comments to that issue at the time the Zoryan was conceived and started functioning in 1982, in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

The basic concept of the institute had three dimensions: to focus research and documentation on contemporary issues, to move the discussion forward in an interdisciplinary manner, and to reflect on what we learn and what we know.

This, we thought, would constitute a new phase in the development of Armenian Studies. The first phase had been the professionalization of Armenian Studies that had begun with NAASR and the establishment of the Harvard University chair. Until then, Armenian language and history were either confined to community clubs, non-professional researchers, or to a sub-topic in Soviet/Russian and Ottoman history. With larger advances and integration of the community in the larger academic environment and out of a need for legitimizing one's identity came the professionalization of Armenian history, language and literature.

The second phase consisted of the legitimization of modern Armenian history, which begins with Richard Hovannisian's monumental work on the First Armenian republic.

The three dimensions mentioned above would have constituted a new phase. The institute's role would be to focus on Soviet Armenia and the diaspora as evolving and living units, on the way these units relate to each other, to the past, and to the

rest of the world. Such an integrative approach would also have an impact on the way Armenian Studies relates to the social sciences and humanities in general; the Armenian experience would inform and be informed by not only history, language, and literature but also political science, anthropology, social psychology, international relations, etc. No less important was the contribution the institute was to make in developing an ongoing analysis of what was learned and the meaning that learning had for Armenian society and its components.

Obviously, I will not discuss what the institute did or did not do or dwell on its accomplishments or failures; that is not the purpose of my comments, and I would also not be the most objective person to make that judgment. Rather, my comments aim at helping determine the gaps that still exist in the field.

The initial impulse, when we started the institute in 1982, was to avoid the question of the Genocide. That is, we made a conscious effort to transcend the problem of the Genocide. Although the documentation and analysis of the Genocide now preoccupies a number of institutions and an array of scholars, one has to remember that at the time the subject was taken on only by an extremely small number of scholars, laboring with little support from the community, oral history projects being the exception. For the most part it was assumed that the Genocide was a known historical phenomenon that did not need further proof, documentation, or analysis; the problem was how to make the world know about it and how to make Turks and Turkey recognize it. Mind you that the first academic symposium on the Genocide was a one-day event in 1980 at the American Armenian International College in Laverne, California. That was the case, despite the fact that by then a number of chairs in Armenian history had already been established.

But at the Zoryan we initially thought that the Genocide itself might weigh too heavily and could end up dominating the agenda at the expense of contemporary issues, especially the diaspora that had acquired its own dynamics. The diaspora, in my view, is a disintegrating process, because becoming a diaspora is a process of disintegration, a dynamic process of redefining: the diaspora conserves and preserves while it changes, and the changes are governed by the rules of where one is, not where one was or ought to be.

Yet it became impossible to bypass the Genocide, and Genocide became one of the important projects for the Institute. While tending to the prescribed agenda, we developed a major, fifteen-year Genocide documentation and publication project. There was an attempt to realize it in collaboration with the Armenia Assembly, the only organization that showed interest. That did not work out for a number of reasons. The Institute

limited itself to a substantive project of the videotaping of survivors around the world as well as securing documents that we thought were endangered.

The issue remained that in 1982, despite the upheavals and changes in diasporan life and in Soviet Armenia, one would have a hard time finding scholarly looks at either. I can think of only two: Sarkis Atamian's *The Armenian Community* (New York, 1955) covered the Armenian-American scene – an extremely useful but dated book in more ways than one; and Mary Matossian's *The Impact of Soviet Policies in Armenia* (Leiden, 1962), a very valuable contribution that still makes sense today. Interestingly enough, neither author was in "Armenian Studies" at the time and neither author contributed much to Armenian Studies since.

Ultimately, the question was, "How does one 'legitimize' the study of contemporary issues?" Contemporary issues tend to raise questions about one's identity, pride in the past, particularly when the rationale for the establishment of endowed chairs and other Armenian Studies programs has generally been the need to project to the world an ideal image of the Armenian and to legitimize a past that inspires pride in the new generation.

Clearly, it was not possible to accomplish the goal of legitimizing contemporary studies and reflecting on them in a methodical manner without redefining the accepted norms and parameters of discourse in the community and without letting in the theoretical categories that society at large – the scholarly and thinking society – uses to understand itself. In a manner of speaking, the Zoryan Institute was subverting the self-contained, self-defining, autarchic order prevailing in the community, at least at that time. (The real-life events in the new Republic of Armenia may have altered the way the community looks at the print version of events and their treatment by Armenian and non-Armenian scholars.)

Nonetheless, in the 1980s (and possibly today), it was not easy to finance an institution such as the Zoryan Institute. To finance projects that were basically focusing on thinking, rethinking, and sometimes critically analyzing and saying things you need to say about the community, ourselves, in a way that may not be liked by one or another political party or a church, was not very easy. It was easier, though not by much, to find financing for Genocide-oriented projects than for diaspora or Soviet Armenia-related undertakings, both dynamic processes. This required, in fact, creating a market for ideas, bringing together enough of the community of people who were interested in research itself to sustain the effort. The Zoryan Institute's effort also assumed that ideas and analyses make a difference.

There might have been a silent struggle between those who, on the one hand, wanted Armenian Studies as a vehicle of confirmation of identity and reconfirmation of what we knew already by birth but now had footnoted in a book – and thus received the accolades of the community – and those who, on the other hand, wanted to go beyond that and question accepted wisdom and accepted discourse.

In 1987 a Boston-area university official asked me to teach a course in Armenian history. I asked the university why they wanted to have a course on Armenian history. The answer was, "We have American Armenians who would be interested in taking such a course, it would instill pride in their identity." I declined the offer. "The way I teach Armenian history," I said, "I do not deal with heroes and villains, so there may not be much there to be proud about." They called back in two weeks and asked what, if anything, I would teach. I said I would like to teach a course where we imagine Turkish-Armenian relations in the twentieth century, without taking 1915 as the beginning and end of everything. I taught that course in 1987 and learned much from the methodical thinking required by the lectures, and from the students. There were, initially, about fifteen of them: five or six were ethnically Armenian, two of them of Turkish. After the first lecture when I introduced the course, one Turk and two Armenians walked out. The Turk called me a propagandist; two Armenians called me a traitor. Nuances and hard thought did not sell well then, as they do not today.

In the end the interesting question is, "How do you look at the past and what can you do with what you know?" Can you interpret things in a way that inform you more about the present, without the dogma and the intellectual limitations which the past and collective memory sometimes impose on you?

However else one will end up assessing the work of the Zoryan Institute, I think it was its dynamic approach that made it feasible to feel maybe faster than others what was happening in Armenia, the changes that became manifest with the National Movement and earthquake in 1988, and ended as the Third Republic.

Were the goals of the Institute valid at the time? Was there need for such a leap? The answer is, in my view, yes; and there is more need now than at the time. So much has changed in the world of Armenians in the past ten years, yet we still lack serious analysis of what happened in Armenia and in the diaspora, the way one has affected the other. We still lack the forum for scholars and thinkers who are capable of disengaging themselves from daily events and impressions, who differentiate between advocacy, confirmation of an identity defined earlier, and critiquing intelligently.

That is, does knowing Armenian history and Armenian society help anyone understand things more? The debate that takes place today in terms of what is happening in Armenia and in the diaspora is thus far below any standard of discourse that, in my view, should be applied at this point in Armenian Studies. That is, I see a lack of definition of issues beyond the partisan, beyond the political and beyond the immediate. I do not know where it will occur, but that reflective discourse is yet to begin.

The Role of Organizations, Institutions, and Research Centers: 4

Dennis R. Papazian

First, I would like to thank and congratulate the organizers of this conference for their generosity and for their concern for Armenian Studies, especially in the United States.¹ As were the others on this panel, I was asked to speak on "The Role of Organizations, Institutions, and Research Centers in Armenian Studies." To that list, I would like to add specialized research libraries. The topic, of course, is broad, and we can only touch upon some highlights in the short time we have available. Of necessity, then, I will limit myself to a brief outline.

Armenian Studies

In order to comment on this question, it is first necessary to give a brief overview of Armenian Studies in America. As we older scholars know, the field of Armenian Studies was not known, or hardly recognized, in the United States fifty years ago. There were a few trailblazers, such as Sirarpie Der Nersessian, but there were only one or two in the field and none were born in the United States. Credit is due to Manoog S. Young and the early members of NAASR for their foresight in raising funds for the first chair of Armenian Studies in America at Harvard University. Yet it was not the Armenian chairs *per se* which developed the field of Armenian Studies; it was done rather by people such as Nina Garsoïan and Richard Hovannisian, who taught at Columbia University and UCLA, respectively, and were initially not chair holders. Although these two noted scholars were to hold chairs established for them later in their careers, as a tribute to their accomplishments, at least half of their most valuable and significant work was done before that. It was they who not only published early materials in the field of Armenian