

Conclusions

Closing the Epistemic Circle and Future Struggles

The circle of knowledge about the Armenian genocide began to unfold when knowledge repertoires were built up through manifold personal interactions and reflections, through micropolitics of silencing, denial, and acknowledgment. Knowledge entrepreneurs stepped into the picture. Using their privileged access to channels of communication, they shaped rituals and took sides in epistemic struggles in a variety of social fields. In the end, knowledge became objectified and sedimented to establish the “Armenian genocide.” It became part of a taken-for-granted historical reality, especially among young generations of Armenians, part of their identity, collective memory, and cultural trauma.

The epistemic process followed a similar logic among Armenians and Turks, but the content of knowledge took radically different shape for these victim and perpetrator peoples. Faced with fierce opposition from the other side, each of these ethno-national groups used public rituals to solidify knowledge repertoires in the in-group. Each also engaged in conflictual strategies to confront the other, in the spheres of law and politics.

The outcomes of these epistemic struggles were mixed. In *Griswold v. Driscoll*, the legal struggle over teaching guidelines in Massachusetts, the court’s decision did not confirm the knowledge of either side but it allowed the Massachusetts Department of Education’s guidelines to stand. The Armenian genocide thus continues to be a recommended subject of instruction in public schools. In France, legislation acknowledged the history of the Armenian genocide, but the Constitutional Council, on free speech grounds, struck down a later law that sought to criminalize denial of that genocide.

As important as concrete decision-making processes and their outcomes are, we cannot fully grasp their consequences without recognizing that today,

judicial and political conflicts unfold in the context of human rights hegemony, a broad recognition of human dignity and condemnation of mass atrocities and violations of basic human rights. Human rights hegemony emerged in the post–World War II era, simultaneously with the Armenian struggle for recognition. It contributed to the generation and sedimentation of knowledge about mass atrocities, including the Armenian genocide. It also produced counterproductive consequences for those who pursued denialist agendas. In the context of a human rights hegemony, denial created and continues to create painful dissonances. It motivates resistance by civil society and governmental actors, and—consequently—further solidifies genocide knowledge. We have observed this pattern in the aftermath of both the *Griswold v. Driscoll* case and the French Constitutional Council decision. My analysis of media reporting and filmmaking provided further support.

Finally, once sedimented over the course of 105 years, knowledge repertoires about the Armenian genocide constitute a matter-of-course understanding of history. Resistance appears vain, even absurd. Survivors can no longer protect new generations from knowledge of a cruel past, and elders of the third generation typically no longer seek to do so. Young Armenians encounter the history of the genocide in stories told at home, in church, and in cultural associations. Some participate in organized group travel to Yerevan on April 24, the official Armenian day of genocide commemoration. Many students, not just Armenians, encounter knowledge about the genocide through school curricula. Others visit memorials, listen to news about commemorative events, and watch documentary films. Learning about the Armenian genocide is now part of the socializing process through which the objectified reality of the Armenian genocide becomes instilled in the minds of new generations. *At this point, the circle of knowledge closes.*

CONTINUING STRUGGLES AND NEW DIVISIONS

Importantly, though, the closing of the epistemic circle is not the end of history. Those who grow up today with knowledge about the Armenian genocide do so in a world different from that of their elders, and the same will be true for their children and their children's children. In this changed world, the reaffirmation of, and struggles over, genocide knowledge take different shape, in everyday interactions, in ritual life, and in political and legal processes. Consequently, knowledge—no matter how sedimented—continues to mutate.

Several historical changes will affect current and future epistemic struggles and mutations of knowledge. Human rights hegemony is well established, but new cohorts (will) also experience challenges to that hegemony. Nationalist forces, new forms of ethnocentrism advanced by populist political leaders, and growing mistrust in democracy are contributing factors. In the homeland, young

Armenians recently experienced new struggles over democracy. In international relations, Turkey continues to play a powerful role, and President Erdoğan is among the growing number of rulers who exhibit nationalist-populist leanings and practices. These include military assertiveness, even support for Turkey's ally Azerbaijan in a new war in Nagorno Karabakh in fall of 2020 that has killed hundreds and threatens to destabilize the region at the time of this writing. Correspondingly, Erdoğan's government has been enforcing denial with a new vengeance, a continuing provocation to young Armenians and to those who solidarize with them. How will they react to a denialist's deadly campaign against their people that, one century earlier, had fallen victim to his genocidal predecessors? What will the consequences be for knowledge formation? What will they be for practice, war and peace? These are among the questions I have to leave unanswered.

We also saw, however, that Turkish knowledge is no longer unified. A multitude of scholars who contributed critical evidence on the Armenian genocide and about Turkish denialism, many cited in this book, are Turks or of Turkish descent. Many have been forced into exile. Their communication now unfolds around the globe, and some of it reaches back into Turkey. Their chances at making inroads within Turkish society will be contingent on multiple factors, including domestic developments within Turkey and geopolitical shifts. At any rate, new chapters will be added to the history of conflicts over genocide knowledge between Armenians and Turks and their respective allies. In this struggle, coalitions of young Turks and Armenians will play an important role. While this book cannot predict the future shape of genocide knowledge, all evidence indicates that struggles will continue but that acknowledgment will solidify.

This book also calls out for future research. For example, we can read the struggle over recognition of the Armenian genocide as one among a growing number of instances in which populist and authoritarian leaders disregard overwhelming evidence. While the story of struggles over recognition of the Armenian genocide provides insights into these leaders' strategies as well as ways in which they can be defeated, future research on this question is desirable. It seems that opportunities will be plentiful. The struggle over recognition of the Armenian genocide sheds light on elite-populace interaction, and several chapters in this book elaborated on sources of denialism, often strategically deployed by leaders. Yet the book has also shown that conditions of receptivity among the populace matter. In the case of the Armenian genocide, these conditions of receptivity include the suffering of Turks and the defeats experienced by the Turkish state in the period preceding and during World War I, and the conditions of the founding of modern Turkey. Additional factors are authoritarianism, centralized control of the educational system, and the recent and massive cleansing rituals that glorify the Ottoman Empire. In addition, Turkey's geopolitical position in a volatile Middle East, a bargaining chip against pressures from the international community, further enables denialism. Yet denial risks counterproductive consequences, as indicated by the final chapter

of this book. It does so especially in the context of human rights hegemony and sedimented genocide knowledge.

SEDIMENTATION: APPLYING A METAPHOR IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

“Sedimentation” indeed features centrally in this book. It marks the end of a process that begins with rather fluid elements, thoughts expressed in interpersonal interactions, verbal utterances, and diary or memoir writings. The term, borrowed from the work of Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, is one example of the use of metaphors in social science. In geology, *sedimentation* refers to a “process of deposition of a solid material from a state of suspension or solution in a fluid (usually air or water).” The quality of these materials, once deposited, depends on a complex set of factors, “related not only to the density and viscosity of the fluid medium but also to the translational velocity of the depositing fluid, the turbulence resulting from this motion, and the roughness of the beds over which it moves. These processes are also related to various mechanical properties of the solid materials propelled, to the duration of sediment transport, and to other little-understood factors” (www.britannica.com/science/sedimentation-geology).

Translating this definition into the sphere of cultural life, we may think of the density and viscosity of the medium as the shape of network structures in which thoughts and articulations circulate (varying, for example, between diaspora and homelands). Turbulences are the rapidity of social change within which cultural expressions take place (e.g., the breakup of the Soviet Union or the emergence of human rights hegemony). We may liken the features of the material propelled to the variable forms of expression (e.g., spoken word, written text, or ritual performance). The duration of sediment transport is comparable to historical time (105 years), and contributing gravitation is analogous to the power and force expressed in conflictual processes (in the legal and political fields). Importantly, that which is sedimented may be solid, but it is still subject to future mutations: in geology from peat to coal, and—with enough pressure and time—to diamonds. I leave it to the reader to think of the cultural equivalents of these physical materials for the formation of knowledge repertoires regarding the Armenian genocide.

I thus end with two messages. The first is an epistemological lesson that the social and cultural sciences may learn from the natural sciences. Applying the geological concept of sedimentation in sociology reminds us that complex processes require complex and multidimensional theoretical approaches. I attempted to capture those various dimensions in the model of an epistemic circle. Second, and closely related, is a substantive lesson: that knowledge about genocide—including knowledge about the Armenian genocide—is the outcome

of processes that lead from thinking and social interaction, through interventions by knowledge entrepreneurs, through ritual affirmation and conflict carried out in various social fields and national and global settings, toward sedimentation. Subsequent generations acquire such knowledge, and this acquisition occurs in new historical contexts. Sedimented knowledge is thus subject to future change. Especially when attacked by authoritarian forces, those who carry the knowledge will continue to experience suffering, and they will be propelled to engage in future epistemic struggles.