

## ***New Political Subjects in Armenia and March 1 Events***

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The political and social developments in contemporary Armenia share common features with developments in other “third world” countries. However, there are differences in addition to these similarities. The Soviet industrialization in Armenia was accompanied by tendencies of concentration in demography, economy, politics and culture; 30 percent of the nation’s population was concentrated in the capital. The post-Soviet de-industrialization further enforced these concentration tendencies. Interregional disparities grew along with increasing social injustice. In the late Soviet era Yerevan was a bipolar city composed of an urban village and industrial suburbs. The basic principles of the master plan developed by architect Alexander Tamanyan in the 1920s were preserved in the downtown area: a garden-town for laborers with wide streets, mid-rise buildings and accessible parks, where the basic unit was a “yard” – the basic unit where special local communities took shelter. On the opposite side were suburbs, “stone jungles,” filled with industrial plants and unattractive standardized blocks. It is no coincidence that the nickname given by the citizens to one of these suburbs – the “Southwestern District” – was “Bangladesh.”

One difference that can be interpreted to be political was the difference between the “national” and “the Soviet.” But this was not a regular colonial difference based on racial and economical factors.

In the Soviet Union there was no significant economic inequality; social layers were determined by status. The social status of individuals was based on their possession of “prestigious” commodities divided into categories. Prestigious commodities were endowed with symbolic capital, which explained the high status of intelligentsia in the Soviet Union. Among these prestigious commodities were items of Western origin, like jeans, US movies, tape-recorders, pornography and “avant-garde” art, represented in the late Soviet Armenia by abstract and pop art. The latter found representation in the civil landscape in architectural constructions of “communist-capitalist convergence”, like the “Youth Palace,” the “Russia” movie theater, the “Dvin” hotel and so on.

This explicitly pointed out to another political difference: the “local” and the “foreign.”

Yet, the most significant examples of this “convergence” were the cafes. In the 80s Soviet Yerevan there were many cafes scattered in the public parks of the city. The people gathering in these public facilities were mainly members of the intelligentsia like artists, writers, etc. They discussed and shaped the ideas and formulas that later in the “Glasnost” period evolved into slogans for political action. These formulas were based on the aforementioned differences: “the national” and “the liberal.” One was focused on Nagorno-Karabakh’s right to self-determination, whereas the other aimed at developing a market economy and private property.

One of the forms of the manifestation of the second formula was contemporary art that emerged from the underground and became one of the bearers of a Western mindset in post-Soviet Armenia. What bears significance was not that the art presented by those artists had emerged in the West, evolved with Western support and used Western concepts to describe local experiences. More significant is the role of the West as a locus of power without which it was impossible to imagine the reconstruction of the art scene that enabled the emergence of these means and forms of expression. If the “Soviet modernism” of the ’60’s was seeking its legitimacy in the national as a locus of power, then the “Armenian avant-garde,” which was opposed to it, stemmed from the Western mindset/power without which the production of those paintings, installations and art videos would be impossible. On the other hand, the problem of re-distribution of property was vital to the development of the Armenian art scene, including the contemporary art scene. Specifically, the case of the “Hay-Art” Cultural Center building is a case in point: It was initially “donated” to “avant-garde artists” by the liberal regime of Levon Ter-Petrosian, and later reclaimed by the “nationalist” regime of Robert Kocharyan.

Armenian contemporary art was and is affiliated with the local electorate that advocates “democracy,” “human rights,” “market economy” and “economic liberalism” and is presently acting as a pipeline for spreading international capital.

It is noteworthy that class stratification and the formation of the capitalist class were completed during and owing to the Kocharyan regime. The development process of capitalism in Armenia is typical of many other “third world” countries. “Insider” (internal, not formal) privileges shaped “special interest groups”, and a system that was quite different from the European model was created.

Jean-Francois Chevries writes: “The dominance of the European model weakens when a certain norm of capitalist development diverges from socio-political regulative principles. Marx was familiar with capitalism and nation states, but not with the ‘entrepreneurial state’ (*Etat entrepreneur*). Today we are familiar with this new type of state that is sustained with the consent of populations and frequently employs antidemocratic or pre-democratic systems of control.”<sup>1</sup> What spurred the formation of the Armenian entrepreneurial state was that international financial institutions demanded that the government strictly adhere to the “Washington consensus” principles.

Under such conditions, the economy may grow, and life standards may slowly improve; however, these developments will eventually lead to the growth of a revolutionary mood.

What can be seen as the symbolic accomplishment of capitalist reconstruction of Yerevan is the destruction of the historical center of Yerevan, the forced expulsion of its residents and the construction of the “Northern Avenue” in its location. To quote Mike Davis: “Polarized patterns of land use and population density recapitulate older logics of imperial control and racial dominance. Throughout the Third World, post-colonial elites have inherited and greedily reproduced the physical footprints of segregated colonial cities. Despite the rhetoric of national liberation and social justice, they have aggressively adapted the racial zoning of the colonial period to defend their own class privileges and spatial exclusivity...”<sup>2</sup>

A significant turning point was in 2001, when municipal land was put up for auction. In the past, the municipality was only allowed to lease the land. Another important motivation was the urge to make Yerevan an attractive place for foreign tourists, which meant creating a zone of luxury.

The construction of the Northern Avenue was in fact the certification of the capitalist reconstruction of Yerevan. It is also worth mentioning the construction of numerous highway tunnels; in particular, the case of the *Getar* River that used to flow through downtown Yerevan, was asphalted and turned into an underground canal. The symbolic implication of the latter is obvious: an act of violence by the authorities. Like in the 1860’s Paris under Baron Haussmann’s fanatic ruling, the reconstruction of Yerevan in the 2000’s also appears to lead to the maximization of private benefit and the intensification of social control. However, in contrast to the case of Paris, Kocharyan’s reconstruction of Yerevan was focused on the downtown in order to move the upper class (that once used to prefer suburbs for their villas) closer to political institutions.

Consequently, the Armenian bourgeois, like in all other developing countries, “cease to be citizens of their own country and become nomads belonging to, and owing allegiance to, a super terrestrial

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<sup>1</sup> Глобализация / Цивилизация. Беседуют Этьен Балибар, Жан-Франсуа Шеврьё, Катрин Давид и Надя Тази// Политика, философия, искусство. № 1, 2003 [Jean-Francois Chevries, Katherine David, Nadya Tazi “Globalization/Civilization I: Interview with Etienne Balibar,” *Politics, Philosophy, Art*, no.1 (2003).]

<sup>2</sup> Mike Davis. 08 July 2006. “Haussmann in the Tropics.” Available online: <http://worldinformation.org/wio/readme/992003309/1154965269/> [30 August 2009].

topography of money; they become patriots of wealth, nationalists of an elusive and golden nowhere."<sup>3</sup>

The Northern Avenue needs to be viewed as a *creatio ex nihilo* – something created out of nothing. The artificial nature of the street is further underlined by the absence of green areas; only small bushes in tubs. Apparently, the street is to be a witness to the grandeur of the Armenian dictator Kocharyan, a proof of his demiurgic ability to turn nothing into something.

According to Kocharyan, the Northern Avenue was supposed to “embellish” Yerevan in order to attract more tourists and thus become a symbol of globalization.

The capitalist reconstruction of Yerevan also signified the restoration of the ruling electoral “caste” which is currently solely composed of big business “oligarchs” and representatives of the state nomenclature who concentrated in their hands enormous economical power.

The cultural field was also reconstructed. While a decade ago Armenia was a country that imported show business products from Russia, the former center of the empire, and from the Armenian Diaspora, today not only have local products replaced imported ones, but are also “exported.” Show business is politically subordinated to the power system and serves as an ideological platform. It has become the official art of the regime as a capitalist version of totalitarian “socialist realism.”

In terms of the exploitation of urban space, the transformation of the show business into an official tool of propaganda widened the scope of the public events, festivities, outdoor concerts, performances, etc. organized by the authorities.

Images of local celebrities appeared on many street banners and advertising billboards, taking control over manifestations of urban life. The capitalist reconstruction of culture led to the formation of a “society of spectacle,” which, in fact, differs from its counterpart in the West in terms of the commodities offered. Instead of commodities like “freedom” and “democracy” offered by the Western spectacle system, among the spectacular commodities offered by the Armenian power system are “prosperity,” “state,” “nation,” and “genocide.” These reconstructions significantly weakened the position of the “old” political opposition which was heavily defeated in the 2007 parliamentary elections. I believe the reason was that both the authorities and the opposition used the same spectacular commodities per se, turning authoritarianism into a perpetuating complementary factor.

The Impeachment Bloc, mainly composed of young people, came along criticizing the “old” opposition. Their activities had a carnival-like character and were influenced by art-activism. Their main political slogan was “No to robotization (an allusion to former president Robert Kocharyan), no to Sergeanting (an allusion to former prime minister and current president Serzh Sargsyan), no to Dumbening (an allusion to the criminally notorious oligarch Gagik Tsarukyan, leader of the Prosperous Armenia party and nicknamed as ‘dumb’).” Their campaign banners featured portrait photographs of these three politicians with a “Stop” sign stamped over their faces.

The Impeachment Bloc brought a new principle as a first in Armenian politics: everyone should enjoy the political process. Unlike the elitist organizational principles of the “old” opposition, the slogan of this new political movement was “1+1+1+...” A well-known local political essayist Hrant Ter-Abrahamyan described this new phenomenon in the following way: “Real politics returns to streets

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<sup>3</sup> Jeremy Seabrock, *The Cities of the South: Scenes from a Developing World* (Londra: Verso, 1996), p. 211.

and squares. Finally, there is some real talk in the kingdom of authoritarian opposition.”<sup>4</sup> Special attention needs to be paid to the spatial descriptions in the quote. Saskia Sassen writes:

The space of the city is a far more concrete space for politics than that of the nation. Here, non-formal political actors who are rendered invisible in national politics, have better access to the political scene. And, perhaps more importantly, they can constitute themselves as political actors. The fact itself that the new advanced urban economy generates a vastly expanded luxury zone that displaces other firms and homes becomes a fact feeding politics. Urban space is no longer civic, as old local ruling elites aspired to: today it is political. Much of urban politics is concrete, enacted by people rather than dependent on massive media technologies. Street level politics makes possible the formation of new types of political subjectivity, which are not dependent on the formal political system, as is the case with electoral systems.<sup>5</sup>

In the beginning of the same year youth activist initiative *Sksele* (It Has Begun) was launched. Their actions organized in public spaces also had a carnival-like character. This initiative is an example of a new political subject. Arsen Kharatyan, a member of the initiative said, “As soon as this movement becomes formalized, it will immediately limit its own potential and will turn into an artificial NGO, like the many others we have. For us the situation of organized chaos, i.e. talking about concepts we believe in, has extreme importance.”<sup>6</sup>



Hima – Football – 03.07.2008



In fall 2007 the first president Levon Ter-Petrosian returned to the political arena to participate in the presidential elections on February 19, 2008. He mainly tried to rely on this kind of new political subjects. This was an important stimulus for the new generation activist initiatives that were organizing various kinds of activities in different key locations of the city. Among these activist groups it is essential to mention *Hima* (Now)<sup>7</sup> and *Hatuk Gund* (Special Regiment)<sup>8</sup> youth initiatives, *Ver Katz* (Get Up)<sup>9</sup> political movement, *Mi Khump Usanoghner* (A Group of Students) youth movement, *Yeritasard Pahpanoghakanner* (Young Conservatives) NGO, and *Art Laboratoria* (Art lab) cultural organization.

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<sup>4</sup> *Haykakan Jamanak* (Armenian Times), no. 92.

<sup>5</sup> Saskia Sassen. 20 July 2006. “Fragmented Urban Topographies and Their Underlying Interconnections.” Available online: <http://world-information.org/wio/readme/992003309/1154964804/> [30 August 2009].

<sup>6</sup> “*Sksele* initiative will surprise the parliamentarians.” *Aravot*, 23 April 2008. Available online: [www.aravot.am](http://www.aravot.am)

<sup>7</sup> <http://qbhima.blogspot.com/>

<sup>8</sup> <http://hatukgund.do.am/>

<sup>9</sup> <http://verkats.com/>



Hima – Football – 03.07.2008

One of the significant distinguishing characteristics of this oppositional movement was its rejection of state-controlled mass media. The wide application of new digital technologies as an alternative to the state-censored media led to the labeling of the political upheavals of 2008 in Armenia as a “DVD revolution”<sup>10</sup>. Over one million DVDs, most of which were art videos, were produced and distributed during those months. Another important organizational tool was the internet. Many of the aforementioned youth initiatives like the activist movement *Ver Kats* were formed in virtual space. This fact was interpreted by some critics as the end of post-modernism in Armenia.



Hima – The Walk of Political Prisoners in the City – 29.04.2008

The conclusion of the first phase of the movement was the bloody tragedy on March 1 where authorities used weapons against peaceful protesters and ten people were killed. In the aftermath, limitations were imposed on freedoms and rights concerning speech, public demonstrations, rallies, etc. Hundreds of activists were put in jail. After the official termination of the state of emergency the authorities still did not sanction meetings, demonstrations and rallies. Activist groups intensified their

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<sup>10</sup> The expression “DVD revolution” was pronounced for the first time by the opposition leader Levon Ter-Petrosyan (which as he said he had heard from the talks among the protesters) during the 2008 presidential election demonstrations in Yerevan. Activist groups produced and distributed DVDs which contained information about demonstrations, meetings, activist actions and speeches delivered by their leaders as well as video documentations of the clash with the police and special forces on March 1. Using a DVD format made it possible to widely circulate this material, whereas they could not be aired on TV because of strict censorship and if they were published on the web the scope of the circulation would be limited because the internet was not widely accessible. [Here](#) you can find a link to the manifesto DVD REVOLUTION written around the same time by six artists (Tigran Khachatryan, Yuri Manvelyan, Arman Grigoryan, Karen Alekryan, Karen Barseghyan, Arman Martirosyan) reflecting on the revolutionary process in Armenia and proposing an alternative artistic “revolutionary program.”

activities despite the full range of violence unleashed by the police. They also experienced difficulties caused by government-sponsored pro-fascist groups like *MIAK*, *Hayastani Yeritasardakan Kusaktutyun* (Armenian Youth Party), *Mek Azg* (One Nation), *Hamerashkutyun* (Harmony), *Miasin* (Together), *Baze* (Hawk) and so on.



Hatuk Gund - Bubbles in front of the Prosecutor General's Office - 2008



HIMA - "Newspaper reading," one of the first flash mobs after the March 1 events when all public demonstrations were prohibited in the republic

The Northern Avenue became the main arena for activism. Regular action on the Northern Avenue called "Political Walks" evolved in various flash mobs and spontaneous rallies during the state of emergency and involved different opposition groups walking along the avenue and transforming pedestrian traffic into political action. This, of course, led to counteraction by the police, and the discontentment of various corporate security services.

The capitalist reconstruction of Yerevan signifies the fragmentation of urban space. The struggle of the new political subjects is foremost a struggle for public space.

Translated from Armenian by Diran Lokmagozyan