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## **On Governing Narratives: The Turkish-Armenian Case**

Terrence Des Pres is a well known Holocaust expert. He is especially known for his book *The Survivor: An Anatomy of Life in the Death Camps*. In the Summer 1986 issue of *The Yale Review* he wrote an article entitled *On Governing Narratives: The Turkish-Armenian Case*, which considers "the role of governing narratives in a case where the central issue is power versus truth."

... the struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting.  
-Milan Kundera

**I**t has been suggested - by Umberto Eco, by the loquacious diner in *My Dinner with Andre*, that a new Middle Ages is coming or perhaps upon us even now. With the superpowers locked into battle formation, the world becomes a global patchwork of enclaves and vassal states, very like a feudal order. Political behavior is determined less by reason than by martial dependencies, and the integrity of knowledge is preserved, if at all, in ways resembling the monastic practices of medieval Europe. The emergence of a new feudalism threatens many older dreams, not least our hope in progress through enlightenment (that the truth shall make us free), now being displaced by a more recent faith in salvation by force (that godlike weapons will prevail). A further consequence is that knowledge is no longer honored for its utopian promise, but valued for the services it furnishes. These developments have already done much to define us. What they signal is a wholesale shift in our story of ourselves, a turn in world view that can be formulated this way: Our earlier narrative of enlightenment, in which knowledge is the privileged agent of liberty, has been set aside as more and more we take our sense of things from the nuclear narrative of Armageddon, a story in which all privilege, including the privilege of truth, depends flat out upon power.

The figures of enlightenment and Armageddon are examples, as I would call them, of governing narratives. They are presiding fictions that allow us to behold ourselves and make sense of the historical world, and by them the status of knowledge is affected in intimate ways. A striking illustration (I shall use it throughout) comes from the conflict surrounding Turkey's determined effort to deny that the Armenian genocide of 1915 took place. The academic-political quarrel between Turks and Armenians which has included intimidation on the one hand, terrorist attacks on the other, is not a special case but rather, in its sad remorseless way, a compact sign of the times. Our own government, furthermore, sees fit to be involved; and if we rule out (or at least bracket) villainy pure and simple, we are free to consider the role of governing narratives in a case where the central issue is power versus truth.

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Until recently the facts of the Armenian genocide were thought to be certain beyond dispute - more than a million people destroyed in the space of a year, the men cordoned and shot, women and children scourged, ravaged, force-marched across the Anatolian plain and into the deserts of Syria to die of thirst and starvation. Our own official archives are thick with firsthand evidence, and many additional sources exist, including the state papers of several nations, eyewitness documentation, journalistic reports, and testimony by survivors and their children. As much as any historical event can be known, this one is known. What then has happened? How has it come about that increasingly we hear there are "two sides" to every issue, including even this one, and that the time has come to give the other side - the Turkish side - its rightful hearing? Can there be a full alternative? Or has the old and honored method of hearing both sides become a gimmick for turning history on its head and allowing the interests of the Turkish government to occupy center stage?

Two sides, the revision begins - and then we are told no genocide took place but only a vague unfortunate mishap determined by imponderables like time and change, the hazards of war, uncertain demographics. There is a common-sense sound to the Turkish proposal, but to simply insist on "equal time" cannot be the whole of it, especially when the Turkish side (as we shall see) bolsters its case by exploiting its position as part of a global power-system that reaches from Ankara to Washington, a Western system that stands in a posture of war against a second, Eastern system, with both sides dedicated less to truth than to power. Turkey's denial of the Armenian disaster is backed by something larger than mere doubt, and it's here that the connection between contempt for truth and the requirements of cold war politics comes into view.

Historical revisionism is at present very much in the air. If the Holocaust was a hoax, why not the Armenian catastrophe also? If Anne Frank's diary was faked, who's to say that certain documents signed by Talaat Pasha weren't forged as well? Over particulars there can, of course, be endless quibbling. If one wishes to contest a footnote, or to dispute some fact in isolation, one can bring the process of historical recovery to a halt. But verification of past events does not depend on one kind of information merely. It is precisely the convergence of different orders of evidence (official, private, institutional, material) that gives history its substance, and, in the end, problems specific to historiography will be handled by historians.

There are, however, other issues at stake, in particular these: What has happened to the argument that there are two sides to everything, which once worked to foster truth but now works against it? How does information overload undermine the older, critical role of knowledge in favor of newer practices that are more commodity-oriented? What does it mean when a client state like Turkey can persuade a superpower like the United States to abandon its earlier stance toward the genocide of 1915-16? And finally, what is happening to the university if increasing numbers of scholars occupy positions funded or promoted by governments and have no ethical or professional qualms about work that aims, sometimes less, sometimes more, to shore up the official claims of nation-states? These are among the developments that allow Turkish denial to go forward. In ways like these the pressure of cold-war politics distorts information, demotes the university to a station of service, and redefines "truth" as that which can be made to prevail.

That there are two sides to every issue is not in itself a bad thing. Liberal education and the democratic process both require a critical survey of options before the process of judgment can be counted on to get to the heart of the matter. The two-sides method insures a margin of fairness, although of course the vantage of detachment is sometimes abused- as when the passions of advocacy are held to be ungainly or naive. Still, this essentially critical method has had a long history and important applications. Its origins lay in the eighteenth century, where the two-sides argument worked to discount the constrictive authority of Church and monarchy, and thereby encouraged liberties essential to capital in its open-market phase, to liberalism as a political philosophy, and to the new notion of progress through education. Before its wedding with the state, capitalism offered critical habits of mind an important power base, but critical thinking grew quickly to be its own champion. Pluralism was good for business, business was good for pluralism, and both helped liberal ideas - one of which was that official views ought to submit to critical examination.

At the onset of the modern age, therefore, insisting upon the existence of two sides to every issue helped limit established power and allowed for the nurturing of liberties, among them liberty of thought. Thanks also to the new prestige of science, knowledge took on the character of an autonomous enterprise and truth became a power unto itself. Intellectual confidence grew strong enough to contradict the state, and the modern enterprise of critical thinking got off to a goodly start. The further development, however, is that our Enlightenment heritage now finds itself endangered. A new kind of despotism begins to make itself felt, one in which endorsement of the two-sides argument works against the freedoms it was meant to foster. There are still, of course, different sides to the issues we confront, but increasingly the side that counts is the one that speaks with power's voice.

What has happened is that the two-sides argument has degenerated into mere relativism on the one hand, and on the other into the mechanical belief that there must always be "another" point of view. A sort of emptiness has developed at the heart of the critical enterprise, and power has been quick to fill the vacuum. We can say, I think, that the kind of care for truth that insisted on reviewing the evidence has given way to a bewildered skepticism that ends up accepting official positions. Skepticism of this sort is widespread and is part of the revolution in knowledge itself. This is, after all, the age of information, and the program of liberal education, which cultivates the virtues of a definite point of view, has been ambushed by information overload and by the ways flow charts and data systems scatter critical focus. There is no center and nothing holds still. Information becomes fluid and facts dissolve into digital codes. The world comes at us from all sides, and how we handle it depends less on thinking and judging than on the computer programs someone (someone?) writes to do our thinking for us.

None of this defeats historical knowledge, but truth becomes harder to pin down and disinformation easier to spread. One's ability to distinguish fact from propaganda falters amid the nonstop flow of images, printouts, publications, and media events from every corner of the globe. With so many sides to so many issues, we are susceptible to any voice more insistent than our own that tells us which side counts. At this point, unfortunately, we abnegate the rights and duties of critical questioning and turn the making of decisions over to experts and technicians or to officials in high places. Humbled by those who possess "the big picture," we lose our conviction that independent learning leads to truth. Knowledge is no longer the mind's ground of judgment but a commodity for hire. What one knows is neither true nor false, but rather what happens to be worth knowing.

And thus we reach the point of full reversal. The belief that there are two sides to every issue once supported liberty and set earnest minds in contest with the status quo. Now the two-sides method opens up a multitude of perspectives and allows every position its expert opinion. And of expert opinion- backed by talk-show glamour and political clout- there is no end. As John Newhouse put it in the *New Yorker* (22 July 1985), "Reality in the nuclear age tends to become what people whose voices carry say it is." At worst, the predicament of knowledge comes down to this: When we turn to examine hard questions, we discover that smart people with impeccable credentials can certify any side of any issue.

If, then, we ask how an American client-state can contravene historical truth and dissolve knowledge into a productive uncertainty- how the government of Turkey finds the resources to pursue its program of denial- we must start with the fact that deep changes are occurring in our attitudes toward knowledge. And here I come back to the notion of "governing narratives." Those of us in the knowledge industry must now accommodate two unconnected stories of ourselves, two grand designs of worldly destiny in which very different roles are assigned to learning and its uses. To anyone schooled in Enlightenment values, the older narrative is familiar. Its protagonist is *the hero of knowledge*, one whose task is the pursuit of truth in the cause of progress, especially the kind of moral and social advance that increases general liberty. In the new narrative, on the other hand, the central figure is *the hero of power*, one whose professional skill enhances the political charisma and technical capacity of the state to which, East or West, one happens to belong.

These narratives are mythical, of course, but that does not diminish our need to have them inform our thinking and organize our actions. The real point is the difference between them. The older story depicts history as an upward struggle that one day allows knowledge to overcome ignorance and create a world in which truth and liberty are available to everyone. The hero of knowledge is heroic because his or her learning becomes the means through which the retrograde forces of established systems can be opposed and overcome. In this narrative, therefore, knowledge is not merely a tool but an active agency converting, little by little, Leviathan itself - the whole dense mesh of circumstance that stands in truth's way.

The new narrative, on the other hand, is Manichaeic and militaristic, and the hero of power is heroic because he or she assists the state in the urgency of its needs, needs called "security" or "national interest" or whatever, but always exaggerated with crisis and magnified still further by the apocalyptic stance of the superpowers in their bid for global supremacy. Within this framework history is static and events are tactical. Nothing substantial changes until, in the moment of Armageddon, everything changes. Then the battle will be fought and the other side will fall. Meanwhile the superpowers strain to enforce their spheres of influence, and what we behold are two very similar empires staking out the world between them. They do not attack each other directly, but keep the conflict going symbolically (through spectacle and image) and by proxy (through strife between respective client-states). The militarization of the world accounts for the latter. The suborning of knowledge is part of the former.

Our governing narratives oppose each other, but their function is the same in either case. Both assign the flux of human energies an order and a destiny. Both are also utopian, since in both cases a victory is projected that will someday turn the world into a wholly good place. But while the future justifies everything, it accounts for nothing; each narrative therefore must be judged by its present impact. The hero of knowledge, for example, is decidedly more discerning and more wary of force than the hero of power. In the story of enlightenment, furthermore, truth plays a leading role, whereas in the story of empire the truth is at best a reckless element, a sort of wild card in a deck that otherwise is tightly stacked. Power, it goes without saying, is hostile to unindentured knowledge. Both narratives, finally, are vastly abstract, but this does not mean that they lack actuality. Their base, in fact, is history itself.

Looking back, we can see that the narrative of progress was substantiated by an array of positive changes, among them the rapid expansion of capital and the rise of an educated middle class; the general increase in wealth and material well-being; the success of the scientific method with its steady advances in technology; and not least, America itself, the New World endless in opportunity. The narrative of confrontation, on the other hand, is founded on conditions almost systematic in their negativity, including the recolonization of the globe by the superpowers; the decay of human rights and increased reliance on force; the end of openness on earth and the consequent move to occupy the sky; and finally, the shutting down of the future that results from nuclear threat. If this sounds overly dramatic, it may be that the narrative of power is inherently hysterical. Its signs point always to crisis and danger.

Narratives that make purposive sense of the world are fictional, but their challenge is real. How, for example, shall the patient narrative of enlightenment survive the more urgent narrative of confrontation? How do we in the academy expect to be heard against the shouting of cold-war alarms? I mean to say that knowledge is in trouble because historical conditions have changed and a situation has arisen that no longer sustains a story of ourselves in which truth is the principal agent determining our destiny. Now it is power that rules, and destiny gives way to fate. We live in the nuclear cold-war world, where knowledge is power's servant and truth is what the state decrees.

That, at least, is how things look to those who have moved from the narrative of enlightenment to the narrative of Armageddon. With the superpowers ready to annihilate each other, many among us believe that what counts is the battle itself - the earth, after all, is at stake - a struggle to be won by every means that power can summon. And knowledge, of course, is among the means that power summons.

Our universities and research centers are therefore caught between governing narratives and can be useful to either. This means that we have come to a parting of ways. In the nuclear era there isn't room for ivory-tower innocence. As politics invades our lives, our professional lives especially, we cannot escape the necessity of commitment, and our choice will depend on the governing narrative that seems to each of us more real - or more worthy. One solution is to take a position inside the structures of power and speak with the authority that power confers. Those who take that path subscribe to the narrative of empire and may honestly think that the function of knowledge is to support the state in its hour of ultimate need. The other solution - the militant course in a militant time - is to

set one's work against any approach to, or from, the agencies of power, eschewing ideologies of every stripe, left, right, or deceptive middle. The unpalatable fact today is that political order requires the subservience of knowledge.

For scholars repelled by politics, the best solution may be to revive the adversary stance of eighteenth century *philosophes* like Voltaire or Diderot and take up an oppositional or antithetical style of inquiry. What this means in practice is to proceed with doubt toward all things official. Suspension of belief has always been our right, but like other rights, this one needs defending.

The political control of truth quite naturally calls up Orwellian impressions, but in fact the manipulation of knowledge goes deeper than censorship and is more subtle than outright propaganda. It can include conditions under which research will be funded and given a forum, and also the designation of legitimacy to be conferred or withheld in specific fields of inquiry. Jobs, tenure, professional advancement, all can come to depend on taking the approved line. Along with these comes the adjacent phenomenon of the "institute" and "think tank," in most cases with official backing of one sort or another. And then too, there is the way universities pressure their faculties to bring in big money by securing government projects. What all this scrambling means is that in the struggle of memory against forgetting we must compete with official versions and special interests, with public and private demands for serviceable knowledge, with the kinds of online information geared to short-term needs. Amid this din the scholar's independent voice is hard to hear.

We who pride ourselves on learning must now decide if research is to become the service industry that governments require. We are accustomed to denigrating Marxist distortions, and we point with scorn to situations in which Soviet scholars produce results useful to the state. Such cases are highly visible, and the machinery of coercion, which includes exile and imprisonment, makes the Soviet example impressive. But coercion may take other forms as well. I've mentioned appointments and grants, which reminds us that the economic factor is always active. We might also recall the general bias of professionalism, which opens its best avenues of advancement to those whose methods are duly authorized. And not least, there is always the influence of nationality, by which I mean the need to display in one's work a patriotic spirit, especially in times of political stress. At its worst, pressure of this kind becomes McCarthyist; at its best, the gentle nudge of commonweal. And over everything, the profounder nudge of the governing narrative.

The political manipulation of truth is ruinous to any free society - to the scholarly community especially, for if we cannot trust our standards and each other, our enterprise is groundless. Perhaps, however, my description of this threat is too extreme. Perhaps the clash of governing narratives cannot breach the kind of above-the-fray practice that has always been our pride. We can agree that things go badly behind the Iron Curtain, and the example of Nazi Germany is ever before us. But surely in our academies and among our intellectuals, the life of the mind bends to no one. At least among peoples of the Free World, research and learning go forward without interference or intimidation, or so we presume and often boast. But of course our "academic freedom" is abused, sometimes grievously. When it comes to examples of power ordering knowledge, there is no shortage East or West; and in fact, as Edward Said suggests in *Covering Islam*, these

coercive namings of empire-"the West" in contest with "the East"-underlie our failing capacity to make sense of current events. Even so, the Turkish example seems worth remarking, not only because Turkey is high on the list of Free World defenders (second only to Israel and Egypt in American military aid), but because the Turkish attack on truth exemplifies the triumph of the new governing narrative, the one in which truth is fugitive and knowledge consorts with power.

It was once fashionable to expend one's pity upon the "starving Armenians," a sort of teatime sympathy requiring no action but at least recognizing "Turkey's attempt, during the war, to exterminate its Armenian population. It is now fashionable to be shocked at Armenian terrorists and to sympathize with "the Turkish side of the story." This sort of windblown compassion, as I have suggested, is not autonomous; it is, rather, an expression of changes in political climate. During World War I, when Turkey was allied with Germany, the governments of Great Britain and the United States vigorously condemned the genocide then in progress. By 1923, however, when Turkey achieved its status as a modern nation-state, political allegiance began to shift to accommodate the cold-war alignment.

As a traditional enemy of Russia, Turkey was worth wooing; and as the Cold War warmed up, the geopolitical importance of Turkey - its strategic position on the border of the Soviet Union, its willingness to transform Mount Ararat into an outpost for Western surveillance -worked to inhibit criticisms of official Turkish policy then and now. As Jeane Kirkpatrick made clear in her defense of American client-states, political regimes "friendly" to the United States are generally acceptable, no matter what military abuse or contempt for human rights might then require cover-up. Kirkpatrick's distinction between "authoritarian" and "totalitarian" governments is a prime example of how the narrative of empire works to sort out the world. And so it comes about that, at a time when Turkey refuses to admit a genocide occurred, our State Department backs off from its own extensive records and designates the Armenian affair as "alleged"- something in the manner of a back-country rumor.

Officially, that is what the Armenian genocide has become - a sort of distant rumor. Nothing that happened in the hinterlands of Anatolia so long ago can matter to the balance of power in the nuclear age. Governments have always required short-term memory, but never more than now. The historical record either enhances or it hinders the ongoing process of propaganda, and the Free World doesn't need ugly events to question its virtue. At a time when the charisma of national images plays a key role in the symbolic conduct of cold-war encounters, events that contradict the image are officially *not true*. This, in fact, is the definition of "truth" for those who subscribe to the narrative of power, and the new criterion is this: *consistency with system*.

Truth bends to that which is consistent with the program of empire, and what we see, when we observe the Turkish denial of the Armenian tragedy, is a small but vigorous example of the program in action. We see an American client-state trading its loyalty for American endorsement of an image that it, the client-state, thinks it has a right to. This image then becomes integral to the world order it helps to uphold. And it is, finally, consistent with the general pattern of righteousness that Western power uses to promote itself. We begin to understand, therefore, why the Turkish denial of the Armenian catastrophe involves more

than Levantine intrigue or the usual deceit among nations. We are confronting a coherent way of representing the world, not specific to Turkey, but in the Turkish case too visible to overlook.

When it comes to power ordering knowledge, there could hardly be a more open example than the circumstances surrounding the International Conference on the Holocaust and Genocide that took place in Tel Aviv in the summer of 1982. As Israel Charny and others have documented (in a commentary on the proceedings entitled *The Conference Program and Crisis*), when the conference was being planned, officials of the Israeli government importuned certain scholars to stay away. This extraordinary action was in response to messages from representatives of Turkey who had approached the Israeli Foreign Ministry with remarks about the well-being of Turkish Jews, remarks that might have been vague and indirect but that caused officials in Israel to attempt to abort the conference. "There was a sense," says Charny, "that actual Jewish lives were at stake." Suddenly, leaders of Jewish communities in the United States and elsewhere were advising that the conference might better be cancelled. The spiritual head of the conference, Elie Wiesel, decided (after a visit from Turkish representatives and messages from the Israeli government) that he could not attend, citing danger to the lives of Jews in the Middle East. According to the *New York Times* (3 June 1982), which interviewed Wiesel in Paris, "the Turks let it be known there would be serious difficulties if Armenians took part in the conference."

The conference took place as planned, which speaks well for intellectual courage, but the point to keep in mind is that political interests were mobilized against an *academic* meeting. It was a gathering of scholars, nothing less and nothing more, learned men and women convening to pursue understanding. The larger import of events in Tel Aviv is that they reveal the conflict now in progress between the governing narratives that plague us generally. We can feel grateful that in this case the heroes of knowledge withstood the minions of power. But we cannot, I think, afford to call it victory.

The point is that as politics goes, so goes a goodly part of what passes for knowledge. And far from being something as simple as hypocrisy, the current predicament of scholarship reveals a terribly complicated *modus operandi*. One of the best commentators on the relation of knowledge to power has been Michel Foucault. The bearing of politics upon learning becomes, in his later work, a function of the services knowledge and power perform for each other. Some reciprocal trade-off, in Foucault's view, is always in the works. He argues that more than we have cared to admit, scholarly discourse depends upon institutions that are locked into the larger grid of power relations on a spectrum running from the lowliest academic squabble to the nuclear terrorism of the superpowers.

The myth of detachment is dead, and it seems unlikely that we can go on ignoring problems that arise from the deep entanglement of knowledge in the agendas of power. At the same time, we need to keep in mind that truth is now defined in two ways, in accord with the governing narrative to which one subscribes. Truth can be, in the old high sense, the goal of a critical striving to cut through the realm of appearance. Or truth can be the goal of procedures that aim to organize appearance in ways consistent with the system. There is a beauty, an aesthetic, to both. But between them an endless irony obtains, an irony to which Foucault is fully alert when he reminds us that "truth is a thing of this world," not a Platonic entity above and beyond history but very much a bargaining chip in humankind's

struggle with power. That might be truth of either kind, but finally Foucault opts for the historicized version, the kind that arises from "a system of ordered procedures," as when he says that "each society has its regime of truth," to be understood this way:

“that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as truth.”

These "regimes of truth," as Foucault calls them, are intrinsic to the governing narratives of one's historical period. Until some fairly recent date (perhaps midway through the eighteenth century) educated elites openly served their political masters. Then the Age of Enlightenment, announced by Kant's courageous "dare to know," launched the era of independent knowledge. But after only two centuries of intellectual liberty, of critical thinking vis-à-vis the ruling powers, the politicization of knowledge is again gaining ground. We cannot escape this predicament, but neither are we necessarily its absolute victims. If knowledge caters to power, the case is also, as Foucault makes clear, that power depends on knowledge - a small wedge of hope, but one we cannot surrender. At stake is whether or not we wish to be menials, for at the very least, scholars who spend their resources defending the honor of nation - states serve something other than truth.

With what general courage we comport ourselves remains to be seen. In an immediate way, however, our conduct is put to the test by this question: Will the Armenian genocide in Turkey be recognized, or will it go down, with much else, into Orwell's Memory Hole? Or again, at Bitburg in the spring of 1985 President Reagan called upon the world to forgive and forget, to conflate a killer elite with its victims and let the memory of past events fade. Neither history nor conscience was as important to conflate a killer elite with its victims and let the memory of past events fade. Neither history nor conscience was as important to the leader of Western power as a quick fix of relations with German leaders, West Germany being a vassal state to be kept at almost any price. Reagan's symbolic gesture is of course less acute than attempts to cancel the Armenian agony.

What needs emphasis is that these separate cases - Turkey's denial, and Reagan's dismissal, of two of the century's worst crimes - are not only related, not only connected intimately, but are identical as signs of the narrative of power, in which knowledge serves the state and truth is what world leaders say it is.