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A Comparative Approach to Official Discourse on Past Atrocities: The Possibilities and Limits of Models

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Bio

Leyla Neyzi is a Research Fellow at the University of Glasgow on a Leverhulme Trust Visiting Professorship Grant. Her work focuses on oral history in conflict-affected settings, memory studies, Kurdish studies, transnational youth cultures and displacement. Recent publications include “Generation in Debt: Family, Politics and Youth Subjectivity in Diyarbakır.” *New Perspectives on Turkey*, 52 (Spring 2015): 55-75. “National Education Meets Critical Pedagogy: Teaching Oral History in Turkey” is forthcoming in *Oral History Review* 46, no: 2 (Summer/Fall 2019).

In *Dark Pasts: Changing the State's Story in Turkey and Japan*, Jennifer M. Dixon presents her work as a contribution to interdisciplinary scholarship on transitional justice, politics of memory, and international norms. Her starting point is the observation that recent debates on international norms of human rights, accountability and justice have pressured states to come to terms with their past. She characterizes “dark past” as “a large-scale or systematic human rights atrocity that occurred in the past and for which the state bears some responsibility” (p.15). An “official narrative”, on the other hand, she defines as “a state’s characterization of an event...both statements and actions” (p.15). Dixon claims that scholarship on memory has focused more on collective memory and sites of memory than official memory and narratives of memory. She argues that we lack a conceptual framework to analyze and compare different states’ narratives over time. In particular, she asks: what are the political effects of state narratives of memory over time? Dixon’s main interest therefore is in studying the evolution of state narratives constructed subsequent to controversial mass atrocities. Arguing that state narratives are prone to inertia, her goal is to explain the complex mechanisms of change. She uses her comparison of Japan and Turkey—countries not usually studied together—to account for their similarities and differences as well as to create a general conceptual framework. According to Dixon, while change is precipitated by international pressures, the content of change is determined by domestic considerations such as material concerns, legitimacy/identity concerns, and political/electoral concerns. She concludes that change, in so far as it occurs, is layered, multifaceted, multivalent, and ambivalent, with feedback effects.

Jennifer M. Dixon’s contribution is summarized in the figures she presents for the cases of Turkey and Japan as a means of building a conceptual model for analyzing official discourse on mass atrocities.¹ According to this model, official narratives range from the following:

¹ Figure 2.1 for Turkey (p.40) and Figure 5.1 for Japan (p.103).

denial/silence, mythmaking/relativizing, acknowledgement, admitting responsibility. Beyond these “descriptive” elements are what Dixon terms “reparative” elements, which range from apology to compensation to commemoration. She suggests that in the Turkish case, the official narrative has only reached the stage of limited acknowledgement by 2008, while in the Japanese case, the official narrative has included apologies.

Dixon allocates three chapters to each of her case studies. In Chapter two, she provides a background for the Armenian genocide and its aftermath in Turkey. Like other authors who have written about the genocide in relation to the emergence of the Turkish republic², she underscores the fact that Ottoman military and civil elites complicit in the destruction of Armenians (and other Christians) were the same republican elites who constructed the narrative of denial. She argues that international pressures including Armenian terrorism and the emergence of international norms which led to the acknowledgement of the Armenian genocide in many countries (along with weak domestic opposition) resulted in limited changes in the Turkish state’s discourse from the 1980s until the present.

In Chapter three, Dixon focuses on the period between the 1950s to the 1990s. She suggests that until the 1980s, there was little international pressure on Turkey to change its official narrative. When change did occur, it took the form of defensive myth-making, as the Turkish state used its resources to lobby abroad in favor of its denialist position. Key here was the distinction made between the Holocaust and other events and close cooperation with Israel, American Jews and Turkish Jews. In Chapter four, Dixon focuses on the 1990s and early 2000s, when international and domestic pressures on Turkey increased. Key here was the debate on the Kurdish issue in Turkey, including the acknowledgement of the Armenian genocide by Kurdish leaders. Dixon states that while Turkish officials began to use the

² Taner Akçam, *A Shameful Act: Armenian Genocide and the Question of Turkish Responsibility* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2006).

language of reconciliation (“norm signalling”) and made limited attempts at talks with Armenia, not much changed apart from increased polarization within society.

In Chapters five, six and seven, Jennifer Dixon moves on to a discussion of the Japanese case.

In Chapter five, she provides a brief description of the Nanjing massacre of 1937 and the Second Sino-Japanese war, which provided the basis for the construction of the Japanese official narrative. The Nanjing massacre followed Japan’s invasion of China as part of its imperial ambitions in Asia. As in Turkey, one of the main issues in Japan was the question of terminology: which words and terms are used (or avoided) to refer to controversial events?

Dixon shows that despite the fact that Japan lost the war and was occupied by the U.S., it was not forced to deal with the past as western countries chose to support its economic development and reintegration into global trade networks. In addition, as in Turkey, the fact that the same elites continued to rule meant that Japanese leaders chose to avoid discussing the past. Dixon suggests that beginning in the 1970s, Japan moved from silence to some degree of acknowledgement of past atrocities due to international and domestic pressure, although countervailing forces remain.

In Chapter 6, Dixon focuses in more detail on the changes in Japan in the postwar period. She shows that the silence concerning the “dark past” that characterized the postwar period began to change in the 1970s due to pressure from China and other victim states as well as domestic opposition within Japan. The Nanjing massacre was acknowledged and depicted in school textbooks in the 1980s. At the same time, the statements and actions of conservatives kept the defensive myth-making narrative on the table. On the domestic front, the left and the right continued to struggle in to influence the state narrative.

In Chapter 7, Dixon focuses on the case of Japan in the 1990s and early 2000s. She shows that the 1990s were significant in that the defeat of the conservatives and the coming to power of a liberal government made it possible for the state narrative to include a verbal apology as well

as characterization of Japanese actions in the past as wrong. Transnational and domestic organization and opposition (including accounts of the Nanjing massacre in English) played an important role in this process. For example, a Japanese historian presented evidence of the state's role in the organization of the system of "comfort women", and court rulings in Japan accepted the historical facts. However, discussing the period up until 2008, she demonstrates that change is not linear, as the weakening of Japan in recent years strengthened the conservative narrative, resulting in a movement backwards in textbooks and a return by officials to public visits to the controversial Yasukuni shrine which commemorates Japanese soldiers lost in war.

In Chapter 8, Dixon concludes by summarizing her contribution to comparative research on Turkey and Japan as a means of building a model to explain continuities and changes in state narratives of mass atrocities. She reiterates her argument, stating that while both states started from a position of denial and silence, stronger international pressure and domestic opposition as a result of greater freedom resulted in acknowledgement and apology in Japan, while material, legitimacy/identity and political/electoral concerns limited change in Turkey. She argues that domestic opposition in Turkey is not only weaker, but that people in Turkey are more wedded to the state narrative in comparison with Japan. Yet she concurs that nationalism and government conservatism remains strong in both countries. She concludes that overall, international pressures determine change, the content of which is influenced by the domestic context. At the same time, she underscores the fact that official narratives are characterized by continuity and inertia, resisting change, moving back and forth between progressive and conservative positions over time.

What is the contribution of *Dark Pasts* to the literature on the politics of memory? What does the book teach us about Turkey and Japan, and what does it offer to those studying the politics of memory elsewhere? Historians and anthropologists tend to favor in-depth case studies,

while political scientists and sociologists are more prone to comparison, generalization, and conceptual modelling. It is useful to begin with the choice of comparison. Why does Dixon choose to compare Turkey and Japan, and is the comparison tenable? She argues that both countries are “sticky” or hard cases, in that both have resisted coming terms with a mass atrocity in the past. She also suggests that in both cases, the event occurred during wartime, and that the victims are located outside the states in question. However, the histories of the Armenian genocide and the Nanjing massacre are distinctly different, in ways that makes it necessary to go back in more detail to the events themselves—despite the fact that Dixon chooses to begin her study in the 1950s, when both states had already constructed accounts of the past.

As Dixon herself shows, Japan’s colonizing army occupied a separate country, China, and mass atrocities were committed by military personnel during a discrete period, after which the Japanese were forced to leave. The atrocities occurred at a time when Japan was on the winning side, while the construction of the official discourse occurred at a time of loss. In the Ottoman Empire, on the other hand, Armenians (and other Christians) and Muslims lived as subjects of a Muslim empire in a land to which both communities belonged/claimed allegiance to. The mass relocation and subsequent genocide organized by the Ottoman government beginning in 1915 meant a complete loss of Armenians’ (and other Christians’) status as citizens. At the same time, this act of aggression took place at a time of loss for the Ottomans—in fact, it was produced by this loss of empire, territory, and power at a time of rising nationalisms. While organized by the government, the Armenian genocide involved not simply the military: all members of society became complicit in this “shameful act”³ and therefore the relations between Ottoman Armenians and Ottoman Muslims was much more complex than that between Chinese civilians and Japanese soldiers. This is why, in addition to

³ Akçam, *Shameful Act*.

the Armenian community in Turkey, the very land itself (and that above and below the land) haunts Turkey's present, the descendants of perpetrators (and in some cases, victims).⁴ This is quite different than the Nanjing massacre, which clearly haunts China but not necessarily Japan itself.

While Dixon suggests that official memory and narratives of memory are understudied, I would argue that not only that they have been studied, but that official discourse constitutes only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to understanding the politics of memory. For example, in the case of Turkey, official/public discourse on the Armenian "issue" is so well known by now as to be almost banal. What is much more interesting includes complex issues such as what officials (or others) may say off the record or in different contexts. For in many ways, "what happened to the Armenians" is a public secret in Turkey which everyone knows but no one (although this is changing) will declare in public. There is also great diversity within the population in terms of the degree to which the official discourse taught in schools and presented in the media is internalized. Excluded groups, such as Armenians, Kurds, Alevis and populations living in regions historically heavily populated by Armenians and/or where large-scale violence took place, often transmitted memories of these events from generation to generation.⁵

While studying official discourse has its uses, it misses a great deal about the complexity of the politics of memory because it only focuses on public statements and/or actions of officials. And no wonder that this is resistant to change. Yet a great deal *may* be changing in society, even within the official domain, if we go beyond public discourse. What this means is that

⁴ Talin Suciyan, *The Armenians in Modern Turkey: Post-genocide Society, Politics and History* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2017); Eray Çaylı, "'Accidental' Encounters with the Ottoman Armenians in Contemporary Turkey," *Études Arméniennes Contemporaines* 6 (2015):257-270.

⁵ Leyla Neyzi and Hranush Kharatyan, *Speaking to One Another: Personal Memories of the Past in Armenia and Turkey* (Bonn: DVV International, 2010).

official discourse does not necessarily reveal what is going on in society vis-à-vis the politics of memory—even at the elite level. The issue of context is crucial here. Even though Dixon states that she is interested in the agency of both state officials and societal actors, and based her research in part on interviews in Turkey and Japan, it is disappointing not to hear much of the voices of these or other individuals in the book. In terms of sources, much of Dixon’s sources seem to be in English, although she has analyzed Turkish-language textbooks and worked with a translator in Japan.

While Dixon’s discussion of the differences between domestic opposition to official discourse in Japan and Turkey is convincing, I also think she underestimates the degree of change in Turkey up to the present (unfortunately her account terminates in 2008). Not only has the violence perpetrated against Armenians (and other Christians) been a public secret in Turkey since 1915, but not only a small group of public intellectuals but ordinary people have begun to debate this issue publicly, particularly in relation to Turkey’s democratization process and the ever-present Kurdish “issue”.⁶ The same people presenting a denialist public front to “the west” may acknowledge “what happened” in private. As Dixon herself states, it is mostly *raison d’état* (material, ideological/identity and electoral/political concerns) that inhibits officials from changing their public discourse.

Another quibble concerns the use/definitions of the terms “state” and “narrative”. While the term “state” often feels overly monolithic and undifferentiated, Dixon’s analysis of narrative focuses primarily on content, with less attention given to linguistic form or context.

The historical differences between Turkey and Japan seem to account for their divergent paths. Even though Dixon terms both Turkey and Japan “hard” cases, Japan has made much greater strides than Turkey. After all, Japan has both acknowledged, apologized and paid

⁶ Bilgin Ayata, “The Kurds in the Turkish-Armenian Reconciliation Process: Double-Bind or Double Blind?,” *International journal of Middle East Studies*, 47, no: 4 (2015): 807-812.

compensation to some degree for its wartime atrocities—even though change is not unidirectional. As much as international pressures and domestic concerns, the different histories of these atrocities at the baseline seem to account for these developments. Jennifer M. Dixon’s well-written and impeccably organized book provides a useful model to think with for readers interested in continuities and changes in state discourse on past atrocities. At the same time, the advantages of the book are also its disadvantages: given the focus on comparison and conceptual modelling, the book feels overly general and somewhat superficial, with a great deal of needless repetition. In many ways, the main points of the book could easily be summarized in a long article. Nevertheless, it is a valiant attempt to go beyond case studies using a seemingly more neutral, objective language and approach in what remains an ideological battlefield.