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Book review: Փոփոխության Որոնումներ (Quest for Change), Socioscope NGO by Anna Zhamakochyan, Zhanna Andreasyan, Sona Manusyan, and Arpy Manusyan (2016)

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Analyses regarding the effectiveness of specific movements seem to be untimely against this backdrop. The civic sector has yet to enable protests in society in their most general sense. It would be misleading to conclude, however, that ‘culture itself’ must be changed. From what we have observed so far, civic discourses and actions that target culture have triggered even more cultural resistance. Changing “activism itself” as if performing a program update also does not seem to be an effective approach. There is already an unnoticed subject shift in social research from problems that cause protests to protests as problems themselves. To add value, fur-

ther research on activism should also discuss what can be done to work toward change beyond activism. One junction among the various problems that are discussed above is the social agency that must be enhanced alongside individual agency. This approach puts two interconnected goals in perspective: to seek modes of collective action that make individual effort meaningful and to seek modes of individual agency that make collective action meaningful. Individual, social and political conditions are reciprocal and should be addressed in their interconnectedness through cross-disciplinary efforts.

About the Author

Sona Manusyan holds a doctoral degree in psychology and is an assistant professor at Yerevan State University Department of Personality Psychology. She teaches cultural psychology and qualitative methodology in psychology. Sona’s research interests center on identity questions, national subjectivity, the personal-public relationship, and online behavior. Her current research focuses on civic initiatives and larger societal processes in Armenia.

Further Reading

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BOOK REVIEW

Anna Zhamakochyan, Zhanna Andreyan, Sona Manusyan, and Arpy Manusyan (2016): Փոփոխության Որոնումներ (Quest for Change), Socioscope NGO

Reviewed by Armine Ishkanian, London

Quest for Change, written in Armenian, is a compact yet incredibly rich collection of essays. The main questions addressed by the collection of essays are: how to change the situation in Armenia; what does change in this context mean or entail; and what are the obstacles to change? Written from different perspectives and reflecting on recent movements (e.g., Electric Yerevan) and events (e.g., the April 2016 conflict; the Sasna Tsrer siege), the essays examine the current context, the politics and dynamics of activism and protest, and the obstacles to change in Armenia. The essays are written by researchers who, on the one hand are well-versed in the contemporary academic debates and literatures around sociological theories, but who on the other hand are also partic-

ipant observers of the unfolding processes which they describe and analyse. This positionality provides them with insights which may elude outside observers, yet I found that it did not prevent them from embracing a critical distance from which they analyse the unfolding processes and events. Overall, the essays provide an informed, critical, and incisive analysis of the current socio-political situation in Armenia and also offer new perspectives on some perennial issues and questions (e.g., the nature and impact of Armenian nationalism; the nature of the Armenian State, etc.).

The first essay, by Anna Zhamakochyan, examines the different and, at times, contradictory articulations of the discourse of “national unity” which emerged after

the four day war in April 2016 between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Zhamakochyan's analysis is based on her research which analyzed the discourses and practices of well-known and emerging civic initiatives and activist groups: "Facebook activists", political commentators and experts as well as independent or opposition media outlets. She describes how the nationalist, populist discourse of "national unity" is a common feature of the discourses of individuals and groups from across the political spectrum. In other words, Zhamakochyan contends, that the discourse of "national unity" is not only promoted by the ruling elite and individuals, groups, and media institutions that are loyal to it, but also by many self-professed independent experts, opposition politicians, and some activists who challenge the ruling regime on many other issues and fronts. She illustrates how when the conflict erupted in April 2016, even independent journalists and news outlets, advanced the need for "national unity". Her analysis is also grounded in and informed by the historical development and use of the discourse of national unity. By taking a long-term view, Zhamakochyan indicates the resilience of this discourse and asks: how does the persistence of the discourse "national unity" obstruct opportunities for socio-political change in Armenia? This question is just as pertinent today as it was a century ago.

The essay by Zhanna Andreasyan, which follows, is an excellent analysis of how justice is defined, conceptualized, and instrumentalised in Armenia by a range of actors. Analysing the public speeches, press releases, and articles of political leaders, activists, analysts, and even members of the Sasna Tsrer (Daredevils of Sassoon) group, she identifies two primary conceptualizations of justice and examines how these understandings and demands for justice are framed and articulated. The first iteration is the historical conceptualization of justice, by which Armenians demand justice from actors that are located external not only to the Republic of Armenia, but to the wider Armenian diasporic, global community. In this conceptualization of justice, all Armenians are framed as seekers and claimants for justice in response to the crime of genocide. Such demands for historical justice which are directed to external audiences are juxtaposed with the second conceptualization of social justice which targets internal audiences. Andreasyan analyses the ways in which these interpretations and conceptualizations of justice (and their myriad combinations) are deployed by different actors for different purposes. She argues that there is a hierarchy between these conceptualizations such that the internal/social demands "must be sacrificed" (պէտք է զոհվի) in favour of the primary, historical demands of justice (page 47). She maintains that while much is said about injustice, far

less is done to indicate who (i.e., which actors) and how (i.e., through which steps) those injustices can or should be remedied. Andreasyan's essay gives us much food for thought and it will be important to examine how these ideas and demands for justice will develop in the coming years. In particular, given the toxic legacy of state socialism which still makes it very difficult to formulate a progressive left discourse or critique of capitalism, how will movements frame and pursue social justice demands in Armenia?

Embracing a slightly different approach, Sona Manusyan's contribution draws on theories of culture and psychology as it focuses on the relationship between the personal, cultural, and political. She asks, why, despite the widespread discontent and the rise of specific social movements, participation in mobilizations and movements is not expanding to include a wider public in Armenia? Drawing on research conducted with focus groups, interviews with key actors, observations at protest rallies, and the analysis of relevant Facebook groups, Sona Manusyan analyses the different forms of coercion (internal and external to the individual) which shape and limit participation in protest activity and mobilizations. She examines the existing discursive tropes of national identity and mentality and how those shape understandings and behaviours, at times generating inner conflicts within individual actors. On page 69 she asks: "what is unique about protest in a country where there simultaneously exists desire to change the situation alongside fear of change?" Again and again she returns to this conundrum as she seeks to explain the absence of a widespread sense of active agency and willingness to participate in movements. At one point she refers to this as a "resistance against resistance" ("դիմադրություն դիմադրությանը"—p. 83). This is an excellent framing of the paradox, but in the end the essay never really provides an answer as to why there is so much "resistance against resistance". Instead, Sona Manusyan writes, that these are questions and issues which require further consideration. I sincerely hope Sona Manusyan will further pursue this question of why, despite the widespread discontent and demands for change, there is "resistance against resistance" in Armenia.

The volume is completed by Arpy Manusyan's insightful essay on Electric Yerevan. In the essay, Arpy Manusyan analyses the characteristics, discursive practices, and repertoires of action of Electric Yerevan and considers the movement's potential for social change. Drawing on first hand observations and qualitative interviews with participants, Arpy Manusyan asks: what was "new" and "unprecedented" about the Electric Yerevan movement? She argues that what was new and unprecedented was the occupation of a public space—Bagh-

ramyan Boulevard—by a large and diverse group of people. In other words, the repertoire of action (i.e., occupation) and the participation of new actors, beyond experienced activists, was what made Electric Yerevan new and unprecedented. Arpy Manusyan analyses what happened inside the movement during the occupation of Baghramyan Boulevard, examining the ideas and demands, as well as the dynamics and organisational practices emerging from that space. In doing so, she provides the reader with an incredibly detailed “thick description” of the movement. Rejecting a productivist approach, Arpy Manusyan acknowledges the impact Electric Yerevan had, particularly in widening the space for participation and introducing new modes and practices of mobilizing. However, she also recognises the obstacles to change, specifically the absence of a widespread sense of agency and empowered sub-

jectivity among the public. Similar to Sona Manusyan, Arpy Manusyan ends her essay by reflecting on the paradoxical situation in which there is a strong desire for social change that is coupled with the “conviction” (համոզվածություն) that the wider public/community is incapable of being an agent for change.

The book ends with Nazareth Karoyan’s translation of an interview with the French sociologist and philosopher Edgar Morin titled “The Time Has Come to Change Civilization”. The translated interview is beyond the scope of this review, but I found it helps to situate the issues discussed in the essays in a much broader context.

Overall, I believe this collection of essays makes a valuable contribution to the study of politics, activism, social movements, and civil society in Armenia. I highly recommend it to those who wish to understand the current socio-political situation in Armenia.

About the Reviewer

Dr. Armine Ishkanian is a Post-Major Review Tenured Assistant Professor and the Programme Director of the MSc in Social Policy & Development in the Department of Social Policy, London School of Economics (LSE). Her research examines the relationship between civil society, democracy, development and social transformation. She has published numerous academic articles on Armenia and is the author of two books, including *Democracy Building and Civil Society in Armenia* (2008).

Paturyan, Yevgenya Jenny and Gevorgyan, Valentina (2016): Civic Activism as a Novel Component of Armenian Civil Society, Turpanjian Center for Policy Analysis, American University of Armenia

Reviewed by Karena Avedissian, Los Angeles, CA

Yevgenya Jenny Paturyan’s and Valentina Gevorgyan’s study aims to examine the evolving nature of contemporary Armenian civil society. The authors—well-established scholars of civil society in Armenia with a considerable body of work on the subject, do this expertly. They shed light on the growing significance of civic activism, the reassessed position of formal civil society organisations, and the tension between spontaneous activism and organised civil society. Importantly, the study sheds light on understudied aspects of civil society in Armenia—in particular, on the gender dimension of activism, the use of Internet Communication Technologies (ICTs), and the perceptions of individual activists and NGO representatives themselves.

The study is well organised and is divided into ten sections. It begins with theoretical and methodological considerations and a background. The subsequent sections are each dedicated to an element crucial to the

developing nature of civil society in Armenia. The discussions capture Armenian civil society as a dynamic, rather than static, phenomenon shaped by the prevailing political and social culture. The authors save a deeper discussion about social movement theory for the end.

The authors use primary and secondary sources and combine qualitative and quantitative analysis, allowing for a multidimensional account of Armenia’s political arena to then tease out the dynamics of Armenian civil society. This allows for a more detailed and contextualised inquiry into the case studies under examination. Because secondary sources about civil society in Armenia are so few, the research data provided in this study is absolutely invaluable for its up-to-date empirical data from Armenia. The inclusion of well integrated interview excerpts which support the authors’ arguments provide an even greater level of depth than found in most similar studies. In this way, the study goes beyond the