Editorial: fighting with the greater good

Few things in the field make an anthropologist happier than the informant enacting a stereotype without reservation. The tall, tanned man from Los Angeles took two large Havanas from his pocket and gave me one. We sat in a restaurant overlooking Yerevan, capital of Armenia, and Mount Ararat. “We are totally confident. Haven’t you seen the size of the new embassy the Americans are building?” he said. “Clearly, they would never let Karabach be taken by the Russians or the Azerbaijanis. We co-own a hotel down there. Now we are investing in an orange plantation. We also have a stake in the large downtown office development in Yerevan. We are so grateful that we have finally restored our relations with the ancestral country! We can’t wait to do something for Armenia. This feels different.”

Who would doubt the love of the Armenian diaspora for the homeland? The well-remembered and commemorated cruelties under which people were killed and others severed from their ties a century ago understandably seduce many to sacrificial acts of allegiance now that Armenia has become an independent nation. The scale of magnanimity is truly impressive. Even remote villages nowadays have real sidewalks along the roads, something much of the Balkans and neighboring Caucasus lack. The rumor is that they were built with a billion dollar gift from one of the wealthy actors in the US-Armenian diaspora. Civic engagement of this magnitude cannot but produce gratitude in a newly independent poor nation, whose recent rebirth did not come without fresh traumas: from military mobilization and death in action to the breakdown of electricity and other provisions for years. Small wonder that few Armenians complain about the wheeling and dealing of the diaspora, though it is increasingly blurring the boundaries between gifts, capitalism, and outright neo-colonization. Representing roughly half the national product, they are the nation’s single most important lifeline.

There is a predictable flip side to gratitude: the sidewalks, and the interdependencies of soul and cash they symbolize are also a drain on local democracy. Earlier this year, downtown office development led to the forced eviction of hundreds of families from the old center of Yerevan. The old town commanded little respect indeed. Soviet urban planning since the 1920s had intentionally hidden it behind the modernist facades of the Stalin boulevards. It was literally rotting in the backyards of the new town. First culturally degraded by Soviet modernism, then systematically disinvested and unmaintained for decades, it was now expropriated from its inhabitants in one sweep by a newly democratic state determined to facilitate the valuation of diaspora wealth and turn its capital city into a shiny specimen of post-socialist success.

This was no typical slum clearing, though. The displaced were often intelligentsia families for whom the old town had combined low costs with opportunities for alternative consumption and public engagement. Not even they could defend themselves against a post-socialist state that had purposefully retained the final property title over land and had apparently nominated its capitalist diaspora as Geheimrat for development purposes. Socialist urban planning has nowhere been kind to the small old towns east of the Vistula and the Tisza. They were reminiscent of Jews, Germans, Hungarians, Turks, or other ‘parasitic’ and often non-national bourgeoisies. Now the remains of such town life are cherished and restored everywhere in post-socialism. They are turned into proud signs of national histories, multi-culturalism avant la lettre, or key sites for tourism, service-led development, or bohemian/gentrified urban desires. Not so in Armenia. While few will openly complain about
 diaspora influence, everyone deplorer the irreversible loss of old Yerevan.

A non-sentimental reading warns us that really existing democracies, now more than ever, emerge in blunt trade-offs with capitalism and empire. If this comes in the form of diaspora-led development, perhaps the better so—certainly if your particular diaspora has as much love and cash as the Armenian one and is as influential in the US Congress. But it does produce the disabling trappings of hegemony nonetheless: drained democracies.

Without such a diaspora, however, it clearly gets worse: drained democracies easily turn into empty democracies. Focaal’s forum contributions in this issue discuss what happens if your nation has recently celebrated its newly won sovereignty and democracy under the wings of millennial capitalism but lacks an Armenian diaspora of its own. In Kyrgyzstan, staggering inequality and large-scale impoverishment have left little hope after more than a decade of ‘reform.’ Early this year, a rolling uprising overwhelmed the regime in a few days and led to sudden regime change. Note in passing that Western lists of ‘fragile states’ did not even mention Kyrgyzstan—it seemed too solidly anchored in the Western camp. Pelkmans explains that of all the nations in the region, it had indeed experimented most unwaveringly with the Western menu of democracy and reform. The problem was therefore not the lack of this, as everyone seemed to think, but rather the lack of substance for the populations in Central Asia. Where is the beef if investments are confined to retailing (Kyrgyzstan), or all national revenues are appropriated by corrupt oil-elites (Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan), or depressed cotton economies remain based in gendered serfdom (Uzbekistan)? The Kyrgyz revolt, certainly, was contingent on elite dissatisfaction with the regime in several districts. But it was rooted in an angry rejection of the politics of dispossession among rural male sodalities in general. The subsequent Uzbek massacre then showed how little such sodalities can do without divisions within the elite.

As the new Kyrgyz leaders pledged their dedication to liberalism, and politics turned to business as usual almost overnight, it became clear that the revolt had been a classic Gluckmanian ritual of rebellion. While reinstating the rightful king, it failed to generate alternatives for entropy. Will Ukraine and Georgia, contemporary locations of liberal hope, be any different in the absence of an Armenian or even just a Chinese diaspora? Nepal, as Paff-Czarnecka shows, has taken the other path. Here Maoist revolutionary violence is filling the voids of liberal illusions in several mountain provinces. Building up pressure for a more radically negotiated outcome, this might or might not leave more of the necessary resources for substantive democratic reform in the hands of the dispossessed.

Luisa Steur, in her review article, discusses similar silences in indigenous studies. She warns that the voice of indigenous groups has become largely dependent on an array of UN-focused NGOs with ample space for careerism and much praise for liberal rights frameworks spiced with happy culturalism, not unlike the Kyrgyz NGO-based dissidents. Glenn Banks studies another instance of globalization in which inequalities are magnified and culturalisms intensified: large-scale mining developments in newly sovereign Papua New Guinea. Melanie van der Hoorn, finally, narrates a fine tale of another mode of capital-driven sacrifice in post-unification Germany.

Much of this goes against the grain of global expert opinion, which keeps reassuring populations in the peripheries of the unbeatable wisdom of market-led reformism. The thematic section, edited by Simone Abram, interrogates expert practices as they become politics-by-other-means and serve to pre-select particular visions of truth and future over alternative visions in applying science to welfare and justice in national politics. A worthy contribution to the anthropology of science and experts, this special section shows how global science and technology are filtered through national arenas of science-political deliberation and certification, giving a semblance of sovereignty to the nation, and how such national arenas, vice versa, can become targets of contention as alternative visions of the greater good become articulated by competing networks and civic groups (see also Focaal 40, 2002).

— Don Kalb