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The Electric Yerevan between Reproduction and Change

Arpy Manusyan, Yerevan

Abstract

In reaction to the decision of the government of Armenia to raise the electricity tariff by 16.9 percent, several hundred young people gathered in Freedom Square and protested against this robbery on June 18, 2015. In the early morning of June 23, the police used water cannons to brutally disperse the demonstrators and arrested 237 of them. These events [unexpectedly] brought thousands of citizens to Baghramyan Avenue, which remained closed for approximately two weeks.

As various emerging movements in Armenia, the Electric Yerevan was instantly characterized as “new”, “unprecedented” and sometimes even “revolutionary” by researchers, publicists, the media, and activists who were referring to its scale of involving various layers of Armenian society and the repertoire of the protests.

“The Electric Yerevan between reproduction and change” is the retrospective analysis of the movement that attempts to reveal and rethink its potential of creating social change in Armenian society. To reconsider and reveal the Electric Yerevan’s potential to affect social change, the analysis reflects on two aspects—the question that was targeted by the movement and the methods of challenging it and the links between plurality and diversity in the movement.

When the world the sun shines on is always new, how could everyday life be forever unchangeable, unchangeable in its boredom, its greyness, its repetition of the same actions?

Henri Lefebvre, Critique of Everyday Life

Delineating the Problem

Movements and protests are often the signifiers of modern societies and modernity itself. They frame a new political juncture where the public consciousness of fundamental social change appears. Movements appear tangible and vital especially at a time when political actors do not articulate new discourses, and cultural and social spheres experience transformations that lead to various public debates (Touraine 2006). In this situation, political actors begin to heavily control the social order, and movements are thus forced to become more dynamic and capable of resisting oppressive authorities. On the subtle line of the demarcation of continuity on the one hand and political order and stability on the other hand, subjects experience and participate in the origination of movements and social change.

Societies where movements emerge vary in their political, social and cultural contexts, but the dimension of [discursive] similarity should be acknowledged when analyzing them (Ishkanian, Glasius 2013: 2). In response to rising inequality within a society and among societies, the dominant capitalist system, distrust towards governments and the idea of democracy often lie at the heart of the discursive similarity of various movements and riots worldwide (Ishkanian, Glasius 2013: 2). Furthermore, the birth of a movement often requires a trigger point that Neil Smelser calls an “initiating event”—an event that can lead to a chain reaction and the mobilization of society (Smelser 1962).

Various studies that analyze movements, protests and riots in post-Soviet Armenia often describe them as “new”, “unprecedented” and sometimes even “revolutionary”, which indicates that this society is on its way to becoming a political subject that addresses pressing social, political, and environmental issues in the country.

In reaction to the decision of the Armenian government to raise the electricity tariff by 16.9 percent, several hundred people gathered in Freedom Square and protested against this alleged robbery on June 18, 2015. In the early morning of June 23, police brutally dispersed the demonstrators by using water cannons and arrested 237 of them. These events led to an unexpected flow of thousands of citizens to Baghramyan Avenue, which remained closed for approximately two weeks.

The Electric Yerevan was instantly characterized as “new” and “unprecedented” by researchers, publicists, the media, and activists who were referring to its scale of involving various layers of Armenian society and the repertoire of the protests.

What are the implications of the abovementioned characterizations? Does the engagement of manifold layers of Armenian society in the Electric Yerevan necessarily mean a variety of discourses and social practices? Does the presence of thousands of citizens in the Electric Yerevan protests designate wider social change in Armenia?

“The Electric Yerevan between reproduction and change” is the retrospective analysis of the movement and attempts to reveal and rethink its potential of creating social change in Armenian society. To reconsider and reveal the Electric Yerevan’s potential to affect social change, the analysis reflects on two aspects—the question that was targeted by the movement and the reper-

toire to challenge it and the links between plurality and diversity in the movement.

Electric Yerevan's Question

“The question is not the park ...”, “The problem is not the electricity tariff ...”, “The question is not about the elections ...”—these claims are continuously repeated by the various groups of the Armenian public who are engaged in protests and movements.

Anyway, I think that such initiatives have positive outcomes. The Electric Yerevan was a process of empowerment and development for its participants. Regardless of the outcome, there was a lot of benefit from the movement.

Excerpt from an in-depth interview, activist of the Electric Yerevan movement

Considering the abovementioned general attitudes towards uprisings in Armenia and their concrete manifestations in the discourse of the Electric Yerevan's activists, a relevant question arises: what is the urgent issue that challenges Armenian society if various economic, political and social problems that affect the daily practices of the general public often appear purely as a means of manifestation, communication, and self-representation for the majority of the movements and their participants? In the activist discourse where problems are not actually defined as such, actions are not truly committed to facing and overcoming problems.

In this regard, the ability to stay in the street was a key point in describing the Electric Yerevan as a “revolutionary” movement. Baghramyan Avenue acted as an occupied space where citizens attempted to redefine its political meaning by converting the seat of illegitimate authorities to a public space through direct action.

When we emphasize the action of blocking Baghramyan Avenue as a symbolic residence of discredited Armenian authorities, the definition of the Electric Yerevan as a unique movement seems to become conceivable. However, it also appears that the symbolic meaning itself was the most important aspect of the Electric Yerevan protests. The active participants of the movement often acted publicly not so much to solve the problem but to problematize it and to demonstrate to both the authorities and themselves that they are political subjects. In the continuous process of movements in Armenia, people identify and position themselves, whereas publicizing social and political issues serves as a means of self-delineation. Thus, the Electric Yerevan's question and the possibilities to target it were developing in the background of a political system that has extensive recourse to oppress emerging protests and movements. Consequently, the symbolic significance and meaning

of resistance in the Electric Yerevan often prevailed and was considered a sufficient and substantial action that led to tangible changes in society.

“Blocking Baghramyan was the most important action that was done against it during the years of independence: neither Levon [Ter-Petrosian] nor Raffi [Hovhannisian] had ever blocked Baghramyan for two weeks”.

Excerpt from an in-depth interview, activist of the Electric Yerevan movement

The Disruption between Plurality and Diversity in the Electric Yerevan Movement

The Electric Yerevan assured that various layers of Armenian society can be engaged in protests and uprisings while they simultaneously shared a public space for several days. Moreover, the uprising could have become more severe with police violence. Still, the Electric Yerevan's potential to bring thousands of people into the streets should be observed in the frames of two questions. First, did the plurality also contain many discourses and social practices within the movement? Second, did the presence of thousands of people on Baghramyan Avenue mean the expansion of the potential for social changes both in terms of the Electric Yerevan and other movements that would emerge in Armenia?

The main discourses that were being circulated during the Electric Yerevan uprising usually separated two main actors—the creative youth who were open to the world and free of stereotypes and the “masses”. This classification was also pronounced during the in-depth interviews that were conducted with the young Electric Yerevan activists.

I didn't even communicate with the large masses. I communicated with those small groups who were the organizers.

Excerpt from an in-depth interview, activist of the Electric Yerevan movement

I'm not going to participate in processes as “livestock”. If I as a thought generator participate in the movements and my ideas are processed, then I agree to be a part of it.

Excerpt from an in-depth interview, activist of the Electric Yerevan movement

In the discourse of the activists, the “masses” are described as passive consumers of national songs and dances that became an essential part of the Electric Yerevan. The “masses” were not involved in the process of shaping the public discourse of the protest and did not appear in it as oppressed, protesting subjects. This participation by the “masses” was perceived as typical by the active participants of the movement: in the frames of hierarchical public dis-

course, there are “thinkers” and “actors”, and the “masses” are just attendees and individuals in the movement to the extent that they stand behind the “thinkers” and “actors”. In this context, the presence of the “masses” does not indicate the potential to create social change for several reasons.

As Jean Baudrillard mentions, the silent majority does not have any real representation (Baudrillard 2007). The “masses” in the Electric Yerevan were neither the subject nor the object of social change. National songs and dances on Baghramyan Avenue as simple languages of nationalism ensured only the presence of the masses but not their active participation as protesting actors who could rethink their social practices and articulate claims. Moreover, the media was actively involved in the process of uniting the multilayer movement through targeting certain individuals as leaders of the movement and circulating nationalistic rhetoric. As a tool that reproduces the power discourse, the media does not tolerate diversity and applies the discourses of unification. The people who are outside this scope are not represented in the media as real individuals or groups.

Consequently, the “popularization” of the Electric Yerevan and the inclusion of simple national elements created mass public involvement, but these layers of people were initially limited in their ability to act and speak as rebellious subjects.

The Prospects for Social Change

Change is continuity and as such, refers to endurance. Endurance delineates social change in space and time as a continuous process that cannot be discussed as a completed project. However, in our judgments, we almost always mean certain moments in time and space to which we refer as starting points to describe the transition from one social and political state to another, i.e., to define the past and the present. Usually, the movements refer to great expectations of change, and the social and political processes within them are analyzed in terms of moments or points that extract them from the overall context of continuity. After the extensive development of the Electric Yerevan, various attempts occurred to describe the social-political situation in Armenia before and after its emergence and to approach it as a starting point for social change. The Electric Yerevan was not only a result of various achievements and ongoing changes but also a frame of civic and political partic-

ipation for the people who had never been involved in processes of resistance. Still, skepticism tends to win over optimism when analyzing the Electric Yerevan’s internal potential to engage in various discourses and social practices in the movement.

Within various discourses of the Electric Yerevan and especially in the discourse of the activists, the public itself was not identified as a subject for social change. Conversations with the Electric Yerevan’s activists have revealed the general attitudes towards the masses—they cannot speak for themselves, thus, more or less experienced activists undertake this role. The passive consumption of “national” songs and dances was described as the only way to participate in the processes that were aimed at social change.

Thus, we must consider in movements not only various oppressed social groups (for example, women, LGBT people, etc.) but also the oppression of the public itself. The discourses and social practices of wider layers of the public who are even involved in change-oriented movements in Armenia have little possibility for internal transformation because movements themselves often reproduce socially and politically accepted patterns in the scope of nationalistic and hierarchical rhetoric. From this perspective, we continue to discuss a multi-layered, not diverse, engagement of different social groups. Diversity is often oppressed in movements (also in the Electric Yerevan) to avoid violent and brutal confrontations with the police or the authorities (for example, silencing rock music, banning anarchists or LGBT people who bring their flags, etc.), which reproduces oppression as a power practice.

This situation is continuous as long as the subject and the object of social change are vastly differentiated, such as when the active youth are defined as the subject of the discourse and the action disruption occurs within society. This is a controversial situation. On the one hand, there is a strong desire for social change, and on the other hand, there remains a strong belief that the wider public cannot initiate social change. We should rethink the question of how and why social and political movements in Armenia that are apparently horizontal and are against the system continuously reproduce the relations of dominance and hegemony. The so-called leaderless movements, in fact, often obscure and contribute to the continuation of hierarchical relations that replicate the characteristics of opposition to the political system.

About the Author

Arpy Manusyan holds an M.A. in Sociology from Yerevan State University. Currently, she is working at the “Socioscope” NGO. Her main research interests are in the fields of social movements and social change in Post-Soviet countries, particularly in Armenia.

See overleaf for “Further Reading”.

Further Reading

- Harter, J.H. (2011) *New Social Movements, Class and the Environment: A Case Study of Greenpeace Canada*. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
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A Self-Repeating Crisis: the Systemic Dysfunctionality of Armenian Politics

Armen Ghazaryan, Yerevan

Abstract

As much as ‘crisis’, the notions of ‘standoff’, ‘civil resistance’ and ‘rebellion’ also characterize the summer events of 2015 and 2016 in Yerevan. Furthermore, the idea of ‘dysfunctional politics’ can be used to describe these events as well. The “Electric Yerevan” movement and riots connected with the seizure of the police station in Yerevan by the armed group “The Daredevils of Sassoun” reflect some of the fundamental changes in society regarding attitudes and political behavior. They also reflect deep flaws within the political institutions and processes.

Input Problems

These events can be analyzed and understood with the articulation of one of the classic theories of political science: systemic theory, which was suggested by renowned American political scientist David Easton. In this context, the issues of the ‘input’ and ‘output’ of the political system reveal the fundamental problems of Armenian politics. First, the responsiveness of the political institutions towards the ‘input’ of demands and support of society should be analyzed. Second, this analysis should be coupled with an understanding of the appropriateness and timeliness of the ‘output’ of the political system (in form of decisions and actions) to those demands and grievances.

The basic suggestion is that the political system in Armenia has developed in a way that has eliminated a variety of channels for providing the ‘input’ of the political system. Very few ways for reflecting societal grievances have been left open, particularly cooptation into the ‘ruling elite’ or mass protests. Hence, analysis of the reasons that lead to the dysfunctionality of the ‘input’ of the political system in particular can help in understanding the events of the hectic Julys of 2015 and 2016 in Yerevan.

David Easton suggests that political life is a “system of activity” and mainly what keeps the system going are the “inputs of various kinds” that are later transformed into policy results or outputs as a result of the political process. There are two types of inputs that need to be distinguished: support and demands. These two types of inputs should be analyzed separately.

In terms of support, various political institutions and the Armenian political system in general have long lacked public support. This lack can be traced by looking at the trust of the people towards various political institutions, as far as support is usually generated as a result of trust. The trends are not encouraging either; the polls show that public trust in the President decreased from 54% in 2008 to 19% in 2013, with some deviations along the way, and trust in the government during the same period decreased from 42% to 14%. Meanwhile, trust towards the political parties has never been particularly high but still shows decreasing tendencies, from 12% in 2012 to 10% in 2013 (Iskandaryan, CAD, 2015). It is difficult to predict this situation improving in the foreseeable future, particularly taking into account the economic hardship in the everyday life of citizens and general macroeconomic trends in the country.

While speaking of demands, it should be emphasized that the channels for transferring them into the political system do work. The political parties that are supposed to be the main structures that channel public demands into the political system are rather underdeveloped. The ruling Republican Party of Armenia (RPA), which is heavily entrenched in the government system, is rather a conglomerate or mega-party. It includes different “parties” and factions, for instance the party of influential economic actors, or oligarchs, or the party of technocratic youth, etc. This situation creates self-enclosed circles of interests that exclude the demands of