

Armenians as Indigenous

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The Case for Armenians as Indigenous People

Recent arguments in favor of expanding the range of peoples who could be classified as *indigenous* has caught the attention of many scholars and intellectuals who have wondered whether an *indigenous* classification might conceivably be broadened to include Armenians. Steven Salaita's work sees the experiences of Native Americans mirrored in those of Palestinians.¹ In this paper, I ask whether or not indigenous Americans experienced events similar to the experiences of Armenians in Turkey, given that both peoples were subjected to comparable historical theories of progress that condemn indigenous peoples as obstacles to modernization.

While the complex question of Armenian indigeneity defies any pat resolution, this paper comes to three conclusions. First, Armenians occupy so great a variety of positions and statuses that they defy a blanket description, so that point-for-point parallels rarely hold up, especially when Armenians are compared to homogeneous aboriginal groups. For example, Armenians established as bankers in Baku, Tiflis, and Istanbul seem unlikely to fit the category *indigenous*, but centuries-old Armenian families in Bitlis or Van could plausibly be labeled as such. Not only are Armenians impossible to corral into any category, but also the rubric *indigenous* may well be a word that has no exact referent anywhere. Second, Armenian indigeneity is egregiously a social construct.

Armenians *become* indigenous, as it were, only when Ottoman Turkish leaders begin to conceive of a series of modernizing policies that, by definition, intentionally exclude so-called indigenous Armenians. Beginning with the Western-inspired Ottoman state-

¹ Steven Salaita, *Inter/Nationalism: Decolonizing Native America and Palestine* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016).

Armenians as Indigenous

promoted reforms known as the *Tanzimat* and continuing up through the Young Turks' campaign to build a modern nation, both the Ottomans and the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP), categorized Armenians as indigenous remnants, the clutter of a bypassed history who blocked modern nationhood for Turkey. Third, the question of Armenians' indigeneity to Asia Minor was unpredictably revived by U.S. federal district courts. At the beginning of the 20th century (the "American century"), Armenians were suddenly called to account for their own possible indigeneity.² By finally ruling that Armenians were not indigenous to Asia, the Federal courts cleared the way for Armenians to become naturalized American citizens. Once that ruling was made, Armenians were allowed to bring to America relatives and potential spouses, and to exempt themselves from Jim Crow apartheid separating people of color.

I was aware of the court cases from an early age. All my life I have heard, from my mother and her family, about a momentous lawsuit that was brought by the U.S. federal government against Tatos Cartozian, a rug dealer in Portland, Oregon, the city in which my mother was born. Cartozian had applied for U.S. citizenship, and the United States took him to court, urging federal laws passed in 1884 and earlier court rulings that had declared Armenians to be Asian, and therefore non-white, and thus ineligible for naturalized American citizenship. [This reopening of Federal opposition to Armenian citizenship was upsetting to Armenians.](#) Many Armenians hoped that the Cartozian case

² The earlier ruling was a 1909 case, presiding Judge Francis Cabot Lowell ruled that the key points remained unresolved. [http://In re Halladjian et al., 174 F. 834 \[1909\], Circuit Court of Appeals, District of Massachusetts, December 24, 1909. The definitive ruling came 16 years later in the 1925 ruling in United States v. Cartozian, District Court, D. Oregon. http://https://law.justia.com/cases/federal/district-courts/F2/6/919/1551454/.](http://In re Halladjian et al., 174 F. 834 [1909], Circuit Court of Appeals, District of Massachusetts, December 24, 1909. The definitive ruling came 16 years later in the 1925 ruling in United States v. Cartozian, District Court, D. Oregon. http://https://law.justia.com/cases/federal/district-courts/F2/6/919/1551454/)

Armenians as Indigenous

would be resolved in Armenians' "favor," [but for that to happen, the court had to rule that Armenians were not indigenous](#) West Asians.

Steven Salaita has done much to show that to be called indigenous had damaging legal power. Like slavery, the legal status *indigenous* could all by itself block almost every path to social, political, or economic advancement. Demonstrating the force of the term, Salaita has [argued that the indigenous require international protections. In saying so, he has](#) enhanced the power of *indigeneity* as a tool of international political struggle.

The U.N. declaration of indigenous rights holds that

2. States shall provide effective mechanisms for prevention of, and redress for:

(a) Any action which has the aim or effect of depriving them of their integrity as distinct peoples, or of their cultural values or ethnic identities;

(b) Any action which has the aim or effect of dispossessing them of their lands, territories or resources;

(c) Any form of forced population transfer which has the aim or effect of violating or undermining any of their rights;

(d) Any form of forced assimilation or integration;

*(e) Any form of propaganda designed to promote or incite racial or ethnic discrimination directed against them.*³

All these rights were violated for Armenians in [Ottoman](#) Turkey. Armenians had their cultural activities suppressed, their lands taken away, their populations transferred, and

³ [United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, Article 8.2.](https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/DRIPS_en.pdf)
https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/DRIPS_en.pdf

Armenians as Indigenous

their ethnicity used against them. The U.N. resolution on indigenous rights names — point for point — the rights that Armenians were denied.

What makes indigeneity a consequential category is readily explained by Salaita. “Indigeneity is not simply a moral entitlement, but a legal and political category. To access that category is to be positioned as steward and legatee of a particular territory,” writes Salaita.⁴ Skeptics would point out that *indigenous* usually is a name of weakness, a patronizing name applied by the stronger to the weaker. In a common usage of the term, the settlers apply it to the natives. The designation *indigenous* implies the sub-alternity of the powerless. Indigenes wear their strange native costumes and live in hinterlands, forests, and highlands: at least that is the popular implication of the word. While moral entitlement allows Native Americans to start up casinos, the dominant effect is to disable and diminish.

Distinguished historian Cheyfitz pinpoints the risks of seeking the *indigenous* classification. He writes, “The term ‘Indigenous’ brings into the field an ambiguity both promising and dangerous.”⁵ Are the Armenians indigenous to Anatolia? Might they become so? Would Armenians stand to benefit were they reclassified as the *indigenous to* Asia Minor?⁶

⁴ Salaita, *Inter/Nationalism*, 19.

⁵ Cheyfitz, Eric. "Response to Steven Salaita's 'Inter/Nationalism from the Holy Land to the New World: Encountering Palestine in American Indian Studies'." *Native American and Indigenous Studies* 1, no. 2 (2014): 145-146. <https://muse-jhu-edu.ccny-proxy1.libr.ccny.cuny.edu/article/843677/pdf>.

⁶ Indigeneity has been a liability. Salaita, *Inter/Nationalism*, 93-4, declares that the classification has been used against Native Americans and others: “This sort of [modernizing] project also necessitates theories of disparate personhood and agency: the temporal gaps in civilizational development represent apertures that the settler wishes to eliminate in favor of a triumphalist, linear society. The native produces incoherence. The settler craves order. Society cannot be ordered in a primitive state.”

Armenians as Indigenous

Post-Ottoman Turkey in part justified the removal of Armenians by calling them *indigenous* people. Proclaiming themselves the party of *Progress*,⁷ the Young Turks asserted [a Turkish ethnic](#) kinship with modernizers, saying that they wished only to bring everyone the benefits of social and technological progress. Talat Paşa, Enver Paşa, Ziya Gökalp and others had learned all the arguments for modernization and the “civilizing mission” at universities in Paris and Berlin⁸. Even the mere presence of natives retarded or even prevented the building of the modern nation, [according to the](#) Young Turks. Why, they wondered in exasperation, do Armenians stubbornly cling to their language and superstitions (e.g., Christianity), reject generous offers to assimilate and adopt [the](#) Turkish language and customs, sequester themselves in their own backward clans? The Turks chalked all this up to the Armenians’ *indigeneity*. Salaita and other historians trace, through the Turkish pronouncements, the Armenians sliding ominously toward the unfortunate history of Native Americans. “The first outbreaks of genocidal violence in 1892 at Merzifan and at Tokat in 1893, and the uninterrupted pogroms that continued up until the 1915 deportation to the desert of Deir ez-Zor in Syria and the roundups in Istanbul, are events that run parallel to those that were perpetrated against the Native Americans” (Mirabile). The Armenians must go so as to permit the emergence of a grander nation of modern Turkey, imagined as [“progress”](#) itself.

But what was the historical theory that deemed Armenians obstacles to progress and national development? Had Turkish intellectuals formulated a coherent formal

⁷ The Committee of Union and Progress was the full title.

⁸ Mirabile, Paul. “Convergences and Divergences in the Armenian and Native American Genocides.” *EVN Report*. Aug 23, 2020. <https://evnreport.com/raw-unfiltered/convergences-and-divergences-in-the-armenian-and-native-american-genocides/>

Armenians as Indigenous

argument? The Young Turks in part recycled the civilizing mission arguments that Britain, France, and other powers had developed to justify imperialism. [Mustafa](#) Kemal's ethnonationalism attempted to create an ethnically homogeneous Turkish nation. Historian Ronald Suny writes: "Western-oriented Ottoman state-promoted reforms known as the *Tanzimat*, the Hamidian Islamic coalition, and the Young Turks' initial constitutionalism that degenerated into absolutism—followed one another, and non-Turks struggled to find their own place within a tremulous political landscape."⁹ The ambition to create an ethnically "pure" nation "was thwarted by the millions of Kurds who had lived in eastern Anatolia long before the first Turks arrived and who after 1915 spread to lands formerly held by Armenians."¹⁰ The Kurds— even more than the Armenians— prevented [the construction of](#) an ethnically homogeneous Turkey. The Young Turks clearly had an indigenous problem.

The Armenian-backwardness charge [could](#) not stick logically. Yes, the majority [of Armenians](#) were peasants [living in Anatolia](#), but, [still](#) many other Armenians in [what became the Republic of](#) Turkey were [active and engaged](#) international businesspeople, [artists, and intellectuals](#).¹¹ Armenians were [also](#) the dominant commercial class in Tiflis, Baku, and the other cities of Transcaucasia. By 1876, two thirds of the merchants in Tiflis were Armenian, and four out of the six banks were controlled by Armenians; in Baku, by

⁹ [Ronald Grigor Suny. *They Can Live in the Desert but Nowhere Else: A History of the Armenian Genocide* \(Princeton: Princeton U.P, 2015\), xvi.](#)

¹⁰ Suny, xv.

¹¹ [Berch Berseroglu, "Nationalism and Ethnic Rivalry in the Early Twentieth Century: Focus on the Armenian Community in Ottoman Turkey," *The Indian Journal of Political Science* 52, no. 4 \(1991\): 458–94. \[https://www-jstor-org.ccnyc-proxy1.libr.ccnyc.cuny.edu/stable/pdf/41855583.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3Ae08df015d56b885e0f95c0b4b278ff16&ab_segments=&origin=&acceptTC=1\]\(https://www-jstor-org.ccnyc-proxy1.libr.ccnyc.cuny.edu/stable/pdf/41855583.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3Ae08df015d56b885e0f95c0b4b278ff16&ab_segments=&origin=&acceptTC=1\)](#)

Armenians as Indigenous

the last decade of the century, Armenians controlled more than half of the regional oil wells.¹² These facts may well be the real cause of the distrust of and desire to erase Armenians.

Server Tanilli has suggested that both Greeks and Armenians were targeted for removal so that ethnically Turkish or assimilated Turkish individuals could take over bourgeois economic positions, noting “[t]he bourgeoisie of Anatolia having been up till then solidly made up of Greeks and Armenians.”¹³ The geographical proximity of an established Greek state offered a different option with regard to Greek populations in the nationalizing Republic of Turkey: population exchanges between Greece and Turkey started even before the Treaty of Lausanne—a treaty that compelled 1.5 million Greeks to leave Turkey for Greece and 500,000 Turks to leave Greece for Turkey. In contrast, the Armenian homeland lay within the bounds of Turkey itself. Population exchange was out of the question.

Consequently, the Armenians’ *indigeneity*, their attachment to the land of Asia Minor (or, Anatolia, or the Armenian Highlands), was a unique disadvantage.

The Greeks and especially the Jews, mainly residing in large urban centers like Istanbul and Izmir, did not have any similar territorial claims; nor were they seen as standing in the

¹² Walker, Christopher J., *Armenia : The Survival of a Nation* , St. Martin's Press, New York, 1980, 60-61); quoted in Berseroglu, 473; note 20, 492.

¹³ Server Tanilli, *Varia Turcica : ‘Le Tourant de 1913’ in l’Histoire de l’Union et Progrès, édition ISIS, Istanbul 1991, pp. 347-368; translated by Paul Mirabile, in Mirabile, “Convergences and Divergences” <https://evnreport.com/raw-unfiltered/convergences-and-divergences-in-the-armenian-and-native-american-genocides/>*

Armenians as Indigenous

way of Turkish expansionist goals. Armenians were accorded no such protection from the advancing Ottoman force.¹⁴

The same disadvantages of indigeneity were attached to Armenian *compradors*, the Marxist name for the brokers who imported manufactured goods as well as investment capital from Europe. “While only a small segment of the Armenian population consisted of large landowners and compradors,” these more high-flying brokers and middle-
persons were also people living in and doing business inside Turkey.¹⁵ They — as much as the indigenous peasants — were also, theoretically, considered an obstacle to a uniquely “Turkish” progress. “Their position in the economy, vis-à-vis national industrial development, hindered the transition to the capitalist mode of production. . . .”¹⁶ This assertion sounds strange: how did they hinder capitalism if they were bringing in capital? More bluntly, they hindered *Turkish* capitalism. Armenian compradors connected Turkey to the global economy and advanced the global spread of capitalism, yet also from the Turkish viewpoint “the continued existence of the minority [Armenian, Greek, Jewish] bourgeoisie as a comprador class--as opposed to their transformation into industrial capitalists--perpetuated the backward structure of Ottoman industry and contributed instead to the further dependence of the Ottoman economy on European capital through debt bondage and as supplier of raw materials, which assisted the development of capitalism, it was in this classic sense--as an exporter of raw materials and importer of

¹⁴ Berseroglu, 484.

¹⁵ Berseroglu, 464-5.

¹⁶ Berseroglu, 465; Bernard Lewis, *The Emergence of Modern Turkey* (New York: Oxford U.P., 1961, 1968, 454-56.

Armenians as Indigenous

finished goods--that the Ottoman Empire became in essence, a de facto , semi-colony.”¹⁷

Clearly, the new Turkish leadership, steeped in theories of European imperialism, would likely resent the Armenian minority bourgeoisie, because they assisted European capital in using Turkey as something akin to a colony of European imperialism.

Including the compradors and bankers in the category of *indigenous* is plainly stretching the classification. Who, for example, might be considered indigenous to Constantinople/Istanbul? In the Ottoman capital city, Armenians, Greeks, and Jews together constituted upwards of half the population of the city at various times. Of the 1 million inhabitants of Istanbul (in the late 19th century?), 500,000 were Turks, 400,000 Armenians and Greeks, and 100,000 Jews and Europeans.¹⁸

Armenians were distributed across several class categories. But, to return now to the issue of the Cartozian case in Portland, Oregon, Armenians in the United States were also of ambiguous race and ethnic origin. Were the Armenians Asiatic? An amorphous question but a pivotal one, because U.S. immigration law in the early 20th century specifically excluded Asians. In short, Mr. Cartozian could naturalize himself as an American only if he could prove that Armenians were *not* Asians. To prove that he was not Asian, he had to prove that his people were not *indigenous* to West Asia. This, too, was a difficult endeavor.¹⁹

¹⁷ Berseroglu, 466.

¹⁸ Adjarian, Hrachya., "Hayots dere Osmanian Kaysrutyeanc m Banber Erevani Hamalsarani (Yerevan, 1967). *Economic History of Turkey*, Charles Issawi, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1980, 62; cited in Berseroglu, 469.

¹⁹ Mirabile, Paul. "Convergences and Divergences in the Armenian and Native American Genocides." *EVN Report*. Aug 23, 2020. Accessed July 4, 2022: <https://evnreport.com/raw-unfiltered/convergences-and-divergences-in-the-armenian-and-native-american-genocides/>

Armenians as Indigenous

In 1925, the United States sued to cancel the citizenship of Tatos O. Cartozian, an Armenian rug dealer from Portland, Oregon, on the grounds that “at the time of the issuance of his certificate, he was not, nor is he now, entitled to naturalization as a citizen of the United States.”²⁰ That is to say, Cartozian was Asiatic—by definition, not a white person, and consequently had wrongfully acquired U.S. citizenship. The case was brought before the District Court of Oregon to “test” the 1909 decision and determine, once and for all, if Armenians were entitled to citizenship in the United States. It was widely publicized and closely watched as a high-profile case that was to determine the limits of whiteness in North America at the time.²¹

This was the case of which my mother and her sisters spoke even 75 years later.

The famous legal decision in favor of Tatos Cartozian in 1924 established his right to become an American citizen. The court rejected the earlier court’s assumption that Armenians were indigenous peoples in their native Anatolia. No, the federal court in Oregon decided, Armenians such as the Cartozians were settlers from outside Asia, not indigenous residents of it. They were *foreign* settlers of Asia. This still more unlikely label of *settlers* to designate Armenians as non-Asians had the profound result of liberating them from legalized racial discrimination in the U.S.. The ruling threw open the door to naturalized U.S. citizenship for the Cartozians and for all Armenian immigrants. My own Aunt Pareez, born in Sivas, became a naturalized U.S. citizen in

²⁰ Mirabile, EVN Report.

²¹ Tehranian, John. “Performing Whiteness: Naturalization Litigation and the Construction of Racial Identity in America.” *The Yale Law Journal* 109, no. 4 (2000): 817–48. <https://doi.org/10.2307/797505>; Craver, Earlene. “On the Boundary of White: The Cartozian Naturalization Case and the Armenians, 1923-1925.” *Journal of American Ethnic History* 28, no. 2 (2009): 30–56. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40543386>.

Armenians as Indigenous

1974. In addition, Armenians in the United States who were sole escapees from Turkey were entitled to bring over relatives. They were also entitled to invite prospective spouses.²² These entitlements were huge.

My Armenian relatives spoke of the Cartozian decision as a great boon, but my brother and I were deeply suspicious. We understood how seductive whiteness must have seemed to Armenians in the 1920s. With our own eyes in the early 1960s, the horrific evidence of U.S. apartheid was visible in the form of separate bathrooms and drinking fountains, whites-only hotels, restaurants, schools, and trains, and Black chain gangs, all of which we observed first-hand during our family trips to Florida. We understood our relatives' relief at [Armenians “becoming white,” at least legally](#), in 1924. The ruling was to have a positive impact on Armenians' daily life. But the substantial benefits to [my brother and me](#) were not enough to make us forgive our elders for what we saw as their collusion with the oppression of people of color.

The court's decision that Armenians were not indigenous to Asia is, [in itself, at the very least highly](#) questionable [and at most, untrue](#). The word *Asia* itself lacks a stable referent, as the title of Spivak's brilliant study, *Other Asias*, affirms. Armenia stands exactly between two continents, the object of rivalry between the Roman Empire and Parthia/Persia. Is Armenia in Asia? Which Armenia, that of the Roman empire or that of today? *Armenian* is itself a word without a referent, [understood](#) as “whiteness' in North

²² [Zablotsky, 251: “Armenian citizens of the United States were often the only surviving family members of relatives they were now able to sponsor for immigration to the United States. If they could afford it, they were also entitled to invite prospective spouses \(Kaprielian-Churchill 1993\). In light of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, this option was not available to applicants who were categorized as “Asiatic.”](#)

Armenians as Indigenous

America, ‘Middle Eastern-ness’ in Western Europe, ‘European-ness’ in the Middle East and South Asia, and “‘blackness’ in Russia.”²³

Similarly, of the *indigeneity* of Armenians, one can only say, *it* depends.

Armenian survivors of genocide, as shown in films and as described in sermons, might well have been considered to be *indigenous* peoples, ill-equipped for modern statehood and helplessly propelled along their own trail of tears. On the other hand, Tatos Cartozian in Portland was an international businessman, a person more akin to the Armenian bankers and merchant princes of [Constantinople/Istanbul](#), Tiflis, and Baku.

These dueling stereotypes run deep in Armenian experience and, as this paper has shown, are consecrated in Turkish modernizers’ manifestos and U.S. federal court decisions. *This* internal division occurs in everyday life, as when the hard-driving lawyer Aram, the uncle of Armenian-American writer William Saroyan, confronts his nephew. When young Saroyan tells Uncle Aram he wants to be a writer, Aram scoffs at him. “A writer? You want to be a writer? *I* am the writer. I write checks!” The anecdote is a fair allegory of every Armenian’s internal debate. Inside each Armenian, or half-Armenian, a sentimental peasant bard dreaming of a nostalgic homecoming to Anatolia’s Bitlis, always faces off against the savvy, hard-bitten operator to whom everyplace is a foreign land of opportunity. Inside every Armenian alive, worldliness confronts indigeneity. It is an essential conflict, and it cannot be resolved.

²³ [Zablotsky, Veronica. *Governing Armenia: The Politics of Development and the Making of Global Diaspora*. A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. University of California, Santa Cruz. June 2019, 8. \[https://escholarship.org/content/qt5g85p0h7/qt5g85p0h7_noSplash_cad3cfa23035373298cd445ba0bd616b.pdf?t=pugde4\]\(https://escholarship.org/content/qt5g85p0h7/qt5g85p0h7_noSplash_cad3cfa23035373298cd445ba0bd616b.pdf?t=pugde4\); Gayatri C. Spivak. *Other Asias*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2008, 110.](#)

Armenians as Indigenous