



IN MEMORIAM

Rifa'at 'Ali Abou-El-Haj (1933-2022)

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Born in Jerusalem in 1933, Rifa'at A. Abou-El-Haj attended the Friends School in Ramallah from 1949 to 1952, when he immigrated to the United States. He graduated from Washington and Lee University in 1956 and received his PhD in History and Oriental Studies at Princeton University in 1963 with a dissertation entitled “The Reisülküttab and Ottoman Diplomacy at Karlowitz.” In 1967, Abou-El-Haj published select conclusions from his dissertation in the *Journal of the American Oriental Society*.¹

While he was still at graduate school, Abou-El-Haj started teaching at St. Lawrence University in Canton, New York. In 1964, he moved jobs to Long Beach State College, which became California State University, Long Beach (CSULB), in 1972. In the early years of his career, he worked on the period that immediately followed the Treaty of Karlowitz (1699) and published “The Formal Closure of the Ottoman Frontier in Europe: 1699-1703.”² He also flirted with psychohistory very briefly in “The Narcissism of Mustafa II (1695-1703): A Psychohistorical Study.”³

During the 1970s, his interests shifted to new sociopolitical structures that arose in the late-seventeenth and eighteenth-century Ottoman world, as evidenced by “The Ottoman Vezir and Paşa Households 1683-1703: A Preliminary Report,”⁴ which laid down one of the central arguments in his work: the growth of a new political elite that challenged the centrality of the sultan and his household. During this decade, he seems to have grown increasingly frustrated both with traditional approaches to Ottoman history and with newer approaches that he found lacking in theoretical grounding. While reviewing the first volume of Stanford Shaw's *History of the Ottoman Empire and Modern Turkey*, he wrote:

¹ Rifa'at A. Abou-El-Haj, “Ottoman Diplomacy at Karlowitz,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 87 (1967): 498-512.

² Rifa'at A. Abou-El-Haj, “The Formal Closure of the Ottoman Frontier in Europe: 1699-1703,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 89 (1969): 467-75.

³ Rifa'at A. Abou-El-Haj, “The Narcissism of Mustafa II (1695-1703): A Psychohistorical Study,” *Studia Islamica* 40 (1974): 115-31.

⁴ Rifa'at A. Abou-El-Haj, “The Ottoman Vezir and Paşa Households 1683-1703: A Preliminary Report,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 94 (1974): 438-47.

The major difficulty with Shaw's approach is its incapacity to accommodate different and new scholarship. Despite the heavy reliance on a large bibliography of modern scholarship for the writing of the book, new ideas sit uncomfortably side by side with the old, neither affecting them nor affected by them. His essential framework – basically a philosophy of history of the rise, decline, and fall variety – remains, in the end, unmodified.⁵

Taking a critical approach to decline, however, was not enough by itself for Abou-El-Haj as he noted in his review of *Studies in Eighteenth Century Islamic History*:

This type of *laissez-faire* scholarship has to be replaced by more consciously delineated theoretical models which can provide future scholarship with a systematic and cumulative body of knowledge. Only then can some vitality be injected into the field and a genuine scientific dialogue take place.⁶

Abou-El-Haj's growing interest in Ottoman sociopolitical history during the 1970s culminated in his first monograph, *The Rebellion of 1703 and the Structure of Ottoman Politics* (1984),⁷ which was the first in-depth analysis (in English) of a deposition in modern Ottoman historiography within its larger sociopolitical context. In it, he demonstrated how the political authority of the sultan came to be limited by other components of the Ottoman polity, such as the military, the jurists, and the grandees the graduates of whose households gradually came to replace the *devshirme* recruits of the royal household in imperial administration. He also underlined the rebels' concern for the legitimacy of their actions, which they secured by continually consulting with the jurists. Most importantly, he argued that a weakened sultanate did not mean decline; rather, it signaled a structural transformation in the polity.

Abou-El-Haj continued publishing on Ottoman sociopolitical history throughout the 1980s, gradually sharpening his focus on the advice literature, in such articles as "The nature of the Ottoman state in the latter part of the XVIIIth century,"⁸ "*Fitnah, huruc ala al-sultan and nasihat*: Political struggle and social conflict in Ottoman society, 1560s-1700s,"⁹ "The Ottoman *nasihatname* as a discourse over

⁵ Rifa'at A. Abou-El-Haj, "Review of *History of the Ottoman Empire and Modern Turkey* by Stanford Shaw," *The American Historical Review* 82 (1977): 1029.

⁶ Rifa'at A. Abou-El-Haj, "Review of *Studies in Eighteenth Century Islamic History* by Thomas Naff and Roger Owen," *The Historian* 41 (1979): 790-91, at p. 791.

⁷ Rifa'at A. Abou-El-Haj, *The Rebellion of 1703 and the Structure of Ottoman Politics* (Leiden: Nederlands Historisch-Archaeologisch Instituut te Istanbul, 1984).

⁸ Rifa'at A. Abou-El-Haj, "The nature of the Ottoman state in the latter part of the XVIIIth century," in *Habsburgisch-osmanische Beziehungen / Relations Habsbourg-ottomanes*, Wien, 26-30. September 1983: *colloque sous le patronage du Comité international des études pré-ottomanes et ottomanes*, ed. Andreas Tietze (Wien: Verlag des Verbandes der wissenschaftlichen Gesellschaften Österreichs, 1985), 171-85.

⁹ Rifa'at A. Abou-El-Haj, "*Fitnah, huruc ala al-sultan and nasihat*: Political struggle and social conflict in Ottoman society, 1560s-1700s," in *Comité international d'études pré-ottomanes et ottomanes: Vth Symposium, Cambridge, 1st-4th July 1984*, eds. Jean-Louis Bacqué-Grammont and Emeri van Donzel (Istanbul: Divit Matbaacılık ve Yayıncılık, 1987), 185-91.

‘morality,’”¹⁰ and “Ārā’ ‘arabiyya ‘an al-inḥiṭāt al-‘uthmānī fī’l-qarn al-sābi’ ‘ashar.”¹¹ His approach to the advice literature was a direct challenge to earlier approaches that saw in them simply disinterested observers of the Ottoman “decline.” Instead, he argued that these authors represented the interests of an “ancient” political class that was being challenged by “modern” political actors whose rise was a product of commercialization.

In the 1980s, Abou-El-Haj also published articles that engaged with the history and historiography of Arab lands under the Ottomans, such as “The Social Uses of the Past: Recent Arab Historiography of Ottoman Rule,”¹² “An Agenda for Research in History: The History of Libya between the Sixteenth and Nineteenth Centuries,”¹³ and “Taxation, Trade, Production and Society in 16th C. Mosul (According to the Liva Kanunnameler).”¹⁴

Abou-El-Haj’s most influential work was his second book, *Formation of the Modern State: The Ottoman Empire, Sixteenth to Eighteenth Centuries* (1991).¹⁵ As stated by Suraiya Faroqhi and Cornell Fleischer, who wrote a preface to the book,

the study presented here may be seen as an invitation to study Ottoman history as real history, that is to cope with the complexities of sources and their interpretation in the manner normally practiced by medieval or modern historians.¹⁶

Abou-El-Haj was demanding the same kind of respect for the Ottoman historical experience that historians trained in Europe and North America were according to European history but depriving non-western history from. Rather than “decline,” Abou-El-Haj identified the formation processes of a modern state in the Ottoman Empire of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In *Formation of the Modern State*, he thus offered a concrete example of a “more consciously delineated theoretical model” that he had found lacking

¹⁰ Rifa’at A. Abou-El-Haj, “The Ottoman *nasihataname* as a discourse over ‘morality,’” in *Mélanges Professeur Robert Mantran*, ed. Abdeljelil Temimi (Zaghouan: Centre d’Etudes et de Recherches Ottomanes, Morisques, de Documentation et d’Information, 1988), 17-30.

¹¹ Rifa’at A. Abou-El-Haj, “Ārā’ ‘arabiyya ‘an al-inḥiṭāt al-‘uthmānī fī’l-qarn al-sābi’ ‘ashar,” in *La Vie intellectuelle dans les provinces arabes à l’époque ottomane: les actes du III Symposium international d’études ottomanes, Zaghouan, 1988*, ed. Abdeljelil Temimi, 3 vols. (Zaghouan: Centre d’études et de recherches ottomanes, morisques, de documentation et d’information, 1990), vol. 1, 17-21 [English summary, vol. 3, 174].

¹² Rifa’at A. Abou-El-Haj, “The Social Uses of the Past: Recent Arab Historiography of Ottoman Rule,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 14 (1982): 185-201.

¹³ Rifa’at A. Abou-El-Haj, “An Agenda for Research in History: The History of Libya between the Sixteenth and Nineteenth Centuries,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 15 (1983): 305-19.

¹⁴ Rifa’at A. Abou-El-Haj, “Taxation, Trade, Production and Society in 16th C. Mosul (According to the Liva Kanunnameler),” in *La vie sociale dans les provinces arabes à l’époque ottoman*, ed. Abdeljelil Temimi, 3 vols. (Zaghouan: Centre d’Etudes et de Recherches Ottomanes, Morisques, de Documentation et d’Information, 1988), vol. 3, 17-39.

¹⁵ Rifa’at A. Abou-El-Haj, *Formation of the Modern State: The Ottoman Empire, Sixteenth to Eighteenth Centuries* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1991).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, xii.

in earlier attempts at revisionist approaches to Ottoman historiography. The “classical” period was marked by a class-state in which there was almost no distinction between the ruling class and the state. Growing commercialization and the social mobility it produced created new political actors who competed for the control of the state that was in the process of becoming autonomous, thus separating itself from the ruling class. In short, the development of the modern Ottoman state was not the result of external pressures; it was the product of primarily internal dynamics.

Even though CSULB did not have a PhD program in history, Abou-El-Haj came together with students and faculty in reading circles in the larger Los Angeles area. He thus made an impact on the lives of many aspiring Ottomanists, including Heath Lowry and the late Donald Quataert (d. 2011), who were PhD students at UCLA in the late 1960s and the early 1970s and remained close to him later in their careers as well. Abou-El-Haj dedicated his second book to the later members of his reading circle, including Middle East Studies Association’s (MESA) immediately Past President Dina Khoury. In 1992, he moved to SUNY Binghamton and joined Quataert in the History Department there. Together, they turned Binghamton into a major center in Ottoman history, training many graduate students who are currently working all over the United States (and Turkey).

With Irene A. Bierman and Donald Preziosi, Abou-El-Haj co-edited *The Ottoman City and Its Parts: Urban Structure and Social Order* (1991), in which his “Power and Social Order: The Uses of the *Kanun*,”¹⁷ appeared. He continued to publish influential articles on Ottoman sociopolitical history until his retirement in 2014. Some examples are “Aspects of the Legitimation of Ottoman Rule as Reflected in the Preamble to Two Early Liva *Kannunnameler*,”¹⁸ “The Expression of Ottoman Political Culture in the Literature of Advice to Princes (*Nasihatnameler*), Sixteenth to Twentieth Centuries,”¹⁹ “The Role of Women in the Ottoman Empire: How the *khassa* Reproduces the *khassa* — Elite Reproduction in Sixteenth Century Ottoman Jerusalem,”²⁰ and “A Probe into the Social: Ottoman Jerusalem in the Sixteenth Century.”²¹

¹⁷ Rifa’at A. Abou-El-Haj, “Power and Social Order: The Uses of the *Kanun*,” in *The Ottoman City and Its Parts: Urban Structure and Social Order*, eds. Irene A. Bierman, Donald Preziosi, and Abou-El-Haj (New Rochelle: Aristide D. Caratzas, 1991), 77-99.

¹⁸ Rifa’at A. Abou-El-Haj, “Aspects of the Legitimation of Ottoman Rule as Reflected in the Preamble to Two Early Liva *Kannunnameler*,” *Turcica* 21-23 (1991-93): 371-83.

¹⁹ Rifa’at A. Abou-El-Haj, “The Expression of Ottoman Political Culture in the Literature of Advice to Princes (*Nasihatnameler*), Sixteenth to Twentieth Centuries,” in *Sociology in the Rubric of Social Science: Professor Ramkrishna Mukherjee Felicitation Volume*, eds. R. K. Bhattacharya and A. K. Ghosh (Calcutta: Anthropological Survey of India, 1995), 282-92.

²⁰ Rifa’at A. Abou-El-Haj, “The Role of Women in the Ottoman Empire: How the *khassa* Reproduces the *khassa* — Elite Reproduction in Sixteenth Century Ottoman Jerusalem,” in *Festschrift Hans Georg Majer: Frauen, Bilder und Gelehrte - Studien zu Gesellschaft und Künsten im Osmanischen Reich / Arts, Women and Scholars - Studies in Ottoman Society and Culture*, eds. Sabine Präter and Christoph K. Neumann, 2 vols. (Istanbul: Simurg, 2002), vol. 1, 185-93.

²¹ Rifa’at A. Abou-El-Haj, “A Probe into the Social: Ottoman Jerusalem in the Sixteenth Century,” in *Deftology: Festschrift in Honor of Heath Lowry*, eds. Selim Kuru and Baki Tezcan, 2 vols. [*Journal of Turkish Studies / Türklük Bilgisi Araştırmaları* 39-40 (2013)], vol. 1 [39], 83-93.

In 1996-97, Abou-El-Haj taught at Princeton (as Erteğün Visiting Professor) where he made significant impact in the training of several graduate students who continued their relationship with him during the following two and a half decades. Some of these students and his colleagues and friends, including those from his reading circle in the Los Angeles area, came together at a conference convened by the late Donald Quataert in 2010 at Binghamton. Quataert's preface to the conference volume is an excellent assessment of Abou-El-Haj's multi-faceted contributions to the field.²² MESA recognized his contributions to mentorship of graduate students in 2017 with a Mentoring Award:

Honoring his exceptional contributions to the training of others; renowned for his active and insistent mentorship, he fosters the development of our imagination of the past and in the process, changes the way we think about history. Always nurturing, supporting, encouraging, inspiring. A true mentor in every sense of the word.²³

Abou-El-Haj was very well known for his critical appraisals of the field that appeared in the shape of book reviews and such articles as "Historiography in West Asian and North African Studies since Said's *Orientalism*,"²⁴ which introduced the concept of neo-Orientalism. He remained committed to theoretical approaches that render Ottoman history comparable to other histories, exploring paths that could free historians from the confines of the nation-state as he did in "Theorizing in historical writing beyond the nation-state: Ottoman society in the middle period,"²⁵ which was republished as an afterword in the second edition of his *Formation of the Modern State* (2005).²⁶ Thanks to the

²² Donald Quataert, "Preface," in *Beyond Dominant Paradigms in Ottoman and Middle Eastern/North African Studies: A Tribute to Rifa'at Abou-El-Haj*, eds. Donald Quataert and Baki Tezcan [first published as *Osmanlı Araştırmaları / Journal of Ottoman Studies* 36 (2010), accessible online: http://www.isam.org.tr/index.cfm?fuseaction=objects2.detail_content&cid=623] (Istanbul: İSAM, 2010), 9-11; the Turkish translation of this volume includes the republication of a Turkish article assessing Abou-El-Haj's work; see Yunus Uğur, "Rifa'at Ali Abou-El-Haj: Osmanlı Devlet ve Siyasî Yapısına Farklı Bir Bakış," in *Hakim Paradigmaların Ötesinde: Rifa'at Abou-El-Haj'a Armağan*, trans. Aytek Sever (Ankara: Tan Kitabevi Yayınları, 2012), 13-29 [originally published in *Türkiye Araştırmaları Literatür Dergisi* 1/2 (2003): 585-98]. The title of this volume was inspired by "Middle East Studies beyond Dominant Paradigms," the book series edited by Peter Gran, in which the second edition of Abou-El-Haj's *Formation of the Modern State* was published in 2005 [see n. 26 below].

²³ "MESA Mentoring Award," Middle East Studies Association, <https://mesana.org/awards/awardee/mesa-mentoring-award/2017-rifaat-abou-el-haj>.

²⁴ Rifa'at A. Abou-El-Haj, "Historiography in West Asian and North African Studies since Said's *Orientalism*," in *History after the Three Worlds*, eds. Arif Dirlik, Vinay Bahl, and Peter Gran (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), 67-84.

²⁵ Rifa'at A. Abou-El-Haj, "Theorizing in historical writing beyond the nation-state: Ottoman society in the middle period," in *Armağan: Festschrift für Andreas Tietze*, eds. Ingeborg Baldauf and Suraiya Faroqhi (Prague: Enigma Corporation, 1994), 1-18.

²⁶ Rifa'at A. Abou-El-Haj, *Formation of the Modern State*, second ed. (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2005), 73-92.

translation of both of his monographs into Turkish,²⁷ he developed a large following in Turkey where his visit in 2018 occasioned interviews in the press.²⁸ At a workshop convened by Walter Feldman at NYU Abu Dhabi in 2018, he could see the impact he made on the field, which was reflected on the title of the workshop: *A Locally Generated Modernity: The Ottoman Empire in the Long Eighteenth Century*. The locally generated nature of Ottoman modernity, which Rifa'at 'Ali Abou-El-Haj spent his career arguing for, had finally come to occupy a central place in contemporary Ottoman historiography.

²⁷ *1703 İsyani: Osmanlı Siyasetinin Yapısı*, trans. Çağdaş Sümer (Ankara: Tan Kitabevi Yayınları, 2011); *Modern Devletin Doğuşu: 16. Yüzyıldan 18. Yüzyıla Osmanlı İmparatorluğu*, trans. Oktay Özel and Canay Şahin (Ankara: İmge, 2000).

²⁸ The first obituaries for Abou-El-Haj appeared in Turkish academic journals; see David Gutman, "In Memoriam: Rifa'at Abou-El-Haj (1933-2022)," *Kadim* 3 (April 2022): 263-65 [accessible online at <https://dergipark.org.tr/en/pub/kadim/issue/69434/1096219>]; and Isa Blumi, "A Life on the Path of Knowledge: Rifa'at 'Ali Abou-El-Haj," *Kadim* 3 (April 2022): 267-68 [accessible online at <https://dergipark.org.tr/en/pub/kadim/issue/69434/1096714>]. *Tarih ve Toplum - Yeni Yaklaşımlar* 19 (Spring 2022) featured a round table on Abou-El-Haj's legacy (in Turkish) and the next issues of *New Perspectives on Turkey* and the *Journal of Ottoman Studies* will include obituaries, as well.