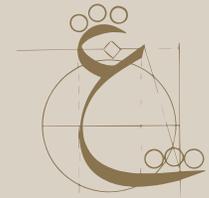
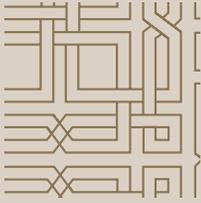




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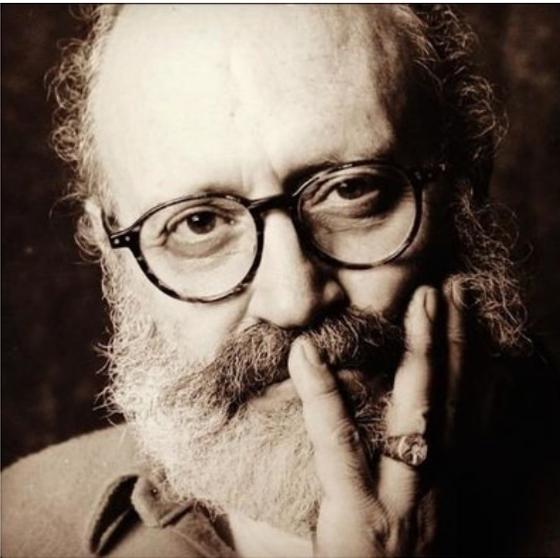
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In Memoriam:
Rifa'at Abou-El-Haj
 (1933-2022)

RIFA'AT ABOU-EL-HAJ
 (1933-2022) ANISINA



DAVID E. GUTMAN*



Historian Rifa'at Abou-El-Haj died suddenly in New York City on March 14, 2022, aged 88. Born in Jerusalem, Abou-El-Haj attended the Friends School in Ramallah. Moving to the United States in the aftermath of the *Nakba* and the creation of the State of Israel, he pursued a PhD at Princeton University under the direction of Lewis V. Thomas, completing his degree in 1963. Norman Itzkowitz, another prominent Ottoman historian of his generation, was a graduate school colleague. After several years of teaching at St. Lawrence University in Canton, NY, Abou-El-Haj assumed a permanent position

at California State-Long Beach in 1964. It is while at Long Beach that he began to make what would be an indelible mark on the study of Ottoman history. To compensate for the lack of graduate students at what was a primarily undergraduate teaching institution, Abou-El-Haj began organizing weekly reading and discussion groups with graduate students and other young scholars in the Los Angeles area. One regular at these discussion groups, Donald Quataert, would later recruit Abou-El-Haj to Binghamton University (SUNY) in 1992, a move made easier by the fact that Abou-El-Haj's wife, Barbara, a rising scholar in the field of Art History, had been



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offered a position at Binghamton a year before. Over the next two decades, he and Quataert built, in Quataert's words, "one of the finest Ottoman studies programs in the country," graduating more than a dozen students who have contributed extensively to the development of the field. I am lucky to count myself among their ranks. Retiring from Binghamton in 2014, three years after Quataert's death, he and Barbara moved outside of Boston. With Barbara's death soon thereafter, he moved to Brooklyn, NY, to be closer to family. He remained until his death a regular presence at lectures and conferences organized by the various universities in the greater New York area.

Early in his career, Abou-El-Haj distinguished himself as a rigorous and relentless critic of the then-dominant orientalist paradigms in the fields of Ottoman and Middle East history. Unlike his fellow Jerusalemite and childhood acquaintance, Edward Said, a few years younger than he, whose famous critique of orientalist scholarship was anchored in cultural studies and discourse analysis, Abou-El-Haj's approach was rooted in political economy and class analysis. He was especially interested in what he would term the "middle period" of Ottoman history, the empire's seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that had long been dismissed by historians as an uninteresting period of decline bookended by the empire's "golden age" of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and the nineteenth-century era of reform. Rather than a period of decline, Abou-El-Haj saw this two-century period, marked by retrenchment and revolt brought about by the end of the Ottoman expansion, as one of profound and fascinating transformation. Ottoman historians had long looked at the *nasihatname*, Ottoman mirror-of-princes literature, penned by advisors to various sultans, as evidence that contemporary Ottomans themselves were aware of their empire's inexorable decline. Abou-El-Haj countered by arguing that present historians were failing to contextualize both these *nasihatname* sources and their authors. What he saw in these documents was evidence of an older Ottoman elite, situated around the palace and the classical Ottoman military apparatus, that was being supplanted by a new class centered on the households of vezirs and pashas with ties both to the central state and to various forms of surplus extraction in the Ottoman provinces. The "decline" decried by *nasihatname* authors was not some objective, trans-historical concept, but rather a sentiment conveyed by an elite cadre frustrated that their power and influence was being eclipsed by an upstart *nouveau-riche* with views on how power should be constituted and exercised that was very different from theirs. The Ottoman system he saw emerging in the late-seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries wasn't a decayed, decentralized, and supine entity, a mere shadow of glory days long past, but an entirely new formation, a state system different from the absolute monarchies arising in Europe but one equally creative and worth studying on its own terms. He published several articles in the 1970s and in 1984, a book, *The 1703 Rebellion and the Structure of Ottoman Politics* (ALCS, 2008, reprint) that explored these dynamics in depth.

His masterpiece, however, one that continues to have an outsized impact on the field, was his book, *Formation of the Modern State: The Ottoman Empire, Sixteenth to Eighteenth Centuries* (SUNY Press, 1991; reprint, Syracuse University Press, 2005). The book marked the culmination of his thinking on the Ottoman middle period and his deconstruction of the decline paradigm, reflecting his firm belief in the abiding creativity and dynamics of Ottoman society and politics. It is no exaggeration to say that this work inspired an explosion of interest in the study of the early-modern Ottoman Empire (the middle period, as Rifa'at

Hoca might say), to the extent that scholars working in this period of Ottoman history are perhaps the most influential in the field today. Abou-El-Haj often expressed frustration at what he saw as insufficient engagement with and interest in his work and in his perspective on the empire's history, but it can safely be argued that the last three decades of scholarship on this once-neglected chapter of Ottoman history is an enduring testament to his legacy and contributions to the field.

To many, Abou-El-Haj was most famous for his cantankerous and combative approach at lectures, and conferences and for his cutting reviews of the latest scholarship. He exhibited little patience for work that he felt did not capture the dynamism and specificity of the Ottoman experience, and he was more than happy to voice his criticisms to whichever hapless presenter or author might be in his crosshairs. He was not afraid to be equally relentless in his critiques of his graduate students' work. But, by and large, his students will remember him fondly for his mentorship and his tireless commitment to make them better and more conscientious scholars. Abou-El-Haj was perhaps equally critical of what he saw as nationalist misappropriations of the past as he was of those put in service of imperialist ends. Nevertheless, he was firmly a member of an earlier generation of Ottoman scholars. In 1985, he was one of the dozens of signatories of an infamous, Turkish government-supported letter that appeared in the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* expressing opposition to congressional recognition of the Armenian genocide. That letter made clear that certain topics were taboo, off-limits to the kinds of probing scholarship that Abou-El-Haj prided himself on. At the same time, he happily supported the work of young scholars studying a bevy of topics from the empire's earliest days to its demise and focused on Ottoman Arabs, Kurds, Armenians, and Jews.

Well into his ninth decade, and several years into his much-deserved retirement, he relished the opportunity to talk long hours on the phone or correspond by email with former students and others about any and every facet of Ottoman history. He died a consummate HISTORIAN, full stop, no further qualifiers necessary. He will be remembered with gratitude and his presence will be sorely missed.

Huzur içinde yat, Hocam.