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*Beyond Dominant Paradigms in Ottoman  
and Middle Eastern / North African Studies*

A Tribute to Rifa'at Abou-El-Haj

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# The Rise of the West or the Rise of the Rich: The Question of an Alternative to Orientalism

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Any conference about Rifa‘at Abou-el-Haj must begin and end by making the point that Middle East Studies is in a state of crisis. This was Rifa‘at’s insight; his life has been spent attempting to overcome this crisis. What he noticed many years ago was that wherever one looks, scholars writing on the Middle East are for no particular scientific reason defining their subject matter in relation to the West, the West being taken as the standard or norm. The question he often asked was why are they doing it. Here recent research suggests that scholars in Middle East Studies do not have much of a choice in terms of what they are doing. They are trapped in a particular meta-narrative called the Rise of the West. One part of this meta-narrative postulates a rising West, another part the stagnation of an Orient; and it is this latter context in which modern Middle East studies functions. Scholars in Modern Middle East Studies are constrained to accommodate this meta-narrative, in part because it has been the one defining the university curriculum until now and in part because they have yet to produce a more suitable alternative. This lack of an alternative has been troubling me for a long time. What I will be describing in this article is an alternative to the Rise of the West, which I have been working on, one which also has

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implications for the curriculum as a whole but here the emphasis will be on its implications for Middle East Studies.<sup>1</sup>

Scholars, it might be worth noting, were not always so constrained by the issue of the meta-narrative as they are today. In medieval and early modern times, one could find a variety of ideas and understandings about Asia and Islam in European thought. At that time there seemed to have been multiple influences at work: fear of Ottoman expansion, an attraction to classical learning and the experience of life in Muslim Spain and Italy to name three. However in more modern times, and most particularly since the second half of the nineteenth century, the university seemed to have become more and more the arbiter of culture; and as this came to be the case the university curriculum seemed to become more and more Hegel writ large, which explains how it is that Western academic Middle East studies is constrained as it is to perpetuate some sort of idea of Orientalness.<sup>2</sup>

One might imagine that one could escape this by being outside academia or outside the West but it is not so easy. Not only do European power structures all support the Hegelian model but so too do the dominant classes of the Middle East. In fact, in the Middle East, there appears to be what one scholar termed a strategic recourse to self-orientalization.<sup>3</sup> From a Middle Eastern ruler's perspective, if the only modernity present is the modernity found in the West and if in a Middle Eastern context the rulers are the only ones with access to the West, then it follows that Middle Eastern society would have to obey its rulers if it wants to modernize. If a ruler were to promote the rise of the West, this might well be a way to increase his power.

- 1 This discussion is drawn from my *The Rise of the Rich: A New View of Modern World History* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2009).
- 2 See Teshale Tibebu, *Hegel and the Third World: The Making of Eurocentrism in World History* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2010). As a graduate student at Binghamton, Tibebu had come to know and admire Rifa'at.
- 3 Mehmet Akif Kireççi, "Decline Discourse and Self-Orientalization in the Writings of Al-Tahtawi and Ziya Gökalp: A Comparative Study of Modernization in Egypt and Turkey," Ph.D. dissertation (University of Pennsylvania, 2007). Behind this work was one of Rifa'at's well-known articles, "The Social Uses of the Past: Recent Arab Historiography of Ottoman Rule," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 14 (1982): 185-201.

But for the researcher, as Rifa‘at has asked more than once, what appeal could such a paradigm possibly have? One would need to have contempt for the people one studies. And, indeed, if this picture of stagnation and decline was all that the Hegelian model could offer, it is hard to imagine his theory lasting as it has outside of government circles. But, actually there is more. What Hegel also allows for and what many in fact have been drawn to was his idea that Islam had had a golden age, a period in which one could find the universal spirit at work. In this period, the Middle East was not an Orient. Thus, one could, by confining oneself to the study of Al-Farabi or Ibn Sina or some such exemplar of the universal spirit, escape the need to orientalize one’s subject. And in fact, through the first half of the twentieth century, the study of this Golden Age was, for many, the appealing part of Middle East studies.

By the 1960’s, the Hegelian meta-narrative’s influence began to lose its prestige. Anti-colonialism had reached the level of mass struggle, social history was emerging as was a critique of Orientalism, these combining to raise serious questions about the adequacy of the Rise of the West paradigm for the study of the Middle East. However, paradigm change came more slowly. In fact, even by the 1980s, not too much had yet changed. There was still no meta-narrative apart from the rise of the West, and one might think that for that very reason, history as a way of thinking, i.e. as a way of knowing about the world, was beginning to lose some of its credibility. The sensible thing for an aspiring historian to do in such circumstances was to abandon criticizing Orientalism as that was not going anywhere and try to salvage what one could through “new” liberal theory. This is what many did and this is where we are today. The reader will doubtless recall Rifa‘at’s well-known essay where he used the term “neo-orientalism.”<sup>4</sup>

It was in the 1980s as well that the insight came to me that the leading politicians and the economically important groups all over the world have important linkages to each other, that they collaborate in many spheres, and that this has been the case for a long time, that even in a great power, the dominant elements from around the world have better access to the ruling circles than do the vast bulk of the local citizens. Therefore, I came

4 R. A. Abou-El-Haj, “Historiography in West Asian and North African Studies since Said’s *Orientalism*,” in *History After the Three Worlds: Post-Eurocentric Historiographies*, eds. Arif Dirlik, Vinay Bahl, and Peter Gran (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000), 67-84.

to think that to attribute power to the territorial West (à la the rise of the West) as opposed to these groups would distort the actual narrative of power. In other words, the main story line of power as we now understand the world ought to be a kind of Neo-Gramscian “rise of the rich,” i.e., the rise of the political and economically dominant and secondarily –but only secondarily– the rise of the West, or core and periphery as in the existing liberalism and political economy.

What we actually observe in modern world history is a group of states all meshed together by treaties, these states are the foundation of the world market. Each state contributes its internal market, the rich arising out of these states becoming a class in itself but not for itself, a class economically and socially linked but politically separated by the constraints of citizenship in what is still after all a world of competing nation states. The rich are thus neither a caste nor a stratum in the Weberian sense nor are they a world ruling class as in Marxism. They do not have the luxury of forgetting their national concerns to that degree. What one finds is that they are an important if neglected empirical phenomenon. I eventually decided the rich were so important that I would call my alternative meta-narrative the rise of the rich, naming it after them.

Adopting the rise of the rich as my meta-narrative and then applying it to Middle East Studies, one finds that the most significant development of the past 400 years was not some event like Napoleon’s invasion of Egypt of 1798 or some discovery such as oil as it might be following Hegel, but rather it was how capitalism served as a basis for the evolving cooperation, both in times of war and peace and in times of colonialism and of independence, of a relatively small group of individuals and institutions spread out across the world in different countries including the countries of the Middle East. The outcome which is all too visible today here to bring this up to date is the rather major disconnect between ruler and ruled found almost everywhere. What we in America sometimes sardonically call the Washington Establishment or the Beltway mentality or the imperial presidency and in Middle East Studies what we have been calling oriental despotism, authoritarianism or failed democracy, all of the above have been made possible presumably because of this alliance system of the rich.

The development of the modern world economy, to pursue this idea a bit further, is thus heavily dependent on the forging of alliances among

these dominant or hegemonic elements, i.e., the rich. This forging of alliances was largely the achievement of go-betweens, individuals who saw their own fortune tied up with the forging of these alliances. Because all this was new to the era of capitalism, I termed these the new men. It was these new men who created or at least patched together the modern world market, doing so in the Middle East through treaties in Iran, through proxy relations in Turkey (here one could recall the role of Greek, Armenian, and Jewish merchants), and through conquest in still other places such as Algeria.

The new men, as far as one can tell, were and today remain a diverse group, mainly from non-elite backgrounds. They were for the most part not official representatives of existing establishments. Today, as in the past, they are still mainly self-made individuals, individuals who aspire to power, in other words, who aspire to belong to the rich and who are prepared to do its dirty work by helping build the world market if that is what it takes to get there. Coming from every national background, these new men—criminals, pirates, military adventurers, speculators, professors, diplomats, businessmen, and others—given their high level of skills, their single-mindedness and their extreme versatility—can take credit for a number of accomplishments, among them, the organization of the periphery of the world market, or what later gets called the Third World or capitalism's main plunder zone, an example of which is of course the Middle East.

Following the rise of the rich approach, the periodization for Middle East history would emphasize two major time frames, 1550-1850, 1850-the present. 1550-1850 marks the birth of modern capitalism and the take-off of the modern system of bilateral relations created by the New Men. It progresses on through the age of mercantilism, up to the age of the capitalist nation state or the age of multilateralism which begins around 1850. Thereafter we are in the age of the capitalist nation state, several different versions of which emerged along the way, examples of which appearing in the Middle East as well as elsewhere.

As this choice of periodization suggests, one might agree with the traditional perspective that capitalism arose centered in England but claim that those who benefitted from it were for the most part the economically and politically dominant groups worldwide and only to a much lesser extent the majority population of countries such as the UK. In explaining why

this would be the case, I reached the conclusion that to benefit requires one to have the capacity to meaningfully contribute and on that basis claim rewards. Any group, even a group on the periphery of the world market, that controlled a subject population and was able to force it to be consumers or to produce for the market or to facilitate its being plundered could expect recognition and privileges. This would include the ruling circles of even rather small countries and even rather late joiners but it would not necessarily include people who simply had some money, i.e., the rich in that sense of the word. Businesses tied to the international economy along with the hegemonic elements of states and empires are the two main parts of the rich. On their margin in both the modern and the contemporary periods, one finds the New Men.

The source material one might rely on, material from social history aside, are first and foremost the collections of treaties of various periods. One such collection which a historian of the Middle East would find useful would be Jacob Hurewitz's *Diplomacy in the Near and Middle East*.<sup>5</sup> When one reads the text of some of the treaties Hurewitz collected what one encounters is not just the commercial *quid pro quo* that appears on line number one of the text of the treaty but also the deeper strategic needs of those who risked signing the treaty. Clearly, there was the possibility that signing a treaty could arouse adverse public opinion so that to a degree these documents were an exercise in disguising what was going on as much as in revealing it. Even as far back as the seventeenth century, it looks as if rulers realized the possibility of their being perceived as betraying the national interest in what they were agreeing to and this they wanted to cover over with reassuring wording in the text, different kinds of hegemonies requiring different approaches to reassurance. One finds, for example, if a treaty was between "bourgeois" England and "caste-based" Persia, as for example the Sherley Accords in 1629, certain things then had to follow for each side, if it was between "tribal-ethnic" Holland and Persia even in roughly the same time period other things had to follow.

In addition to the role played by alliances, the rise of the rich paradigm puts its emphasis on one other feature of capitalism, that of plunder. You may recall in the Rise of the West approach, plunder is an acknowledged

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5 Jacob Hurewitz, *Diplomacy in the Near and Middle East: A Documentary Record, 1535-1914*, 2 vols. (Princeton: Van Nostrand, 1956).

feature of Early Modern history although it is never put on the same level as that of trade or production. Moreover, it is thought that plunder came to an end by the time of the industrial revolution or by the time of the abolition of chattel slavery a few years later. This, however, proves not to have been the case. Plunder is the great source of profit for the world market; it continues to the present day. Perhaps its importance today is even greater now than before given the scale of capitalist integration worldwide and the risk of worldwide stagnation that that integration entails.

Historically speaking, plunder was inherent in the European colonialism of the Middle East as it was elsewhere; today plunder is inherent in US policy to the Middle East as one can see most obviously from our foreign policy based on war. Writers on the subject of US policy to the Middle East following the Rise of the West mainly all assume that the US is interested in controlling Middle Eastern oil and that war might follow. Yet, what is also apparent-and this is generally passed over- is that most of the oil regimes are controlled by the US in any case. For the Rise of the Rich paradigm, the stagnation of world capitalism requires plunder, and plunder requires policies on the part of the lead country such as a policy of war economy. Even the lesser markets in places such as the Middle East are plunder zones. Recall the famous quote from Rumsfeld in Baghdad about his shopping trip. Surrounded by heavily-armed soldiers, he told the media, "the market is open; I got five rugs for five bucks." This even goes beyond what Samir Amin calls "unequal exchange." It is simply robbing a rug merchant and calling it commerce. For the rise of the West, however, this same story, here to repeat, is naturally understood quite differently. The very idea of capitalism needing plunder to avoid stagnation is hard to imagine. Most scholars probably cannot even imagine stagnation. It is, let us say, an article of faith that after every short term crisis of the business cycle, capitalism recovers and once again we prosper. The fact that recovery also coincides with wars and plunder is not a part of the equation. The issue of stagnation thus does not arise. It thus suffices for a student of capitalism to look at the conventional cycle of production, distribution, and consumption, and stop there. Yet, in point of detail, and this, too, is well-known, at least to researchers, a great deal of profit observably comes from activity termed illegal activity, much of which -not all of course- takes place in the Third World. This, one might hypothesize, is why the Third World, including the Middle East, actually is important to world capitalism.



It is not because of its oil per se but rather its importance is as a plunder zone. Its mineral wealth, its labor, everything, the land itself is not simply for sale but open to plunder. The Rise of the West approach does not allow for such considerations, because it would conflict with the assumption that Western institutions, businesses for example, are governed by law while the activities referred to here are simply criminal activities and criminal activities are just that and no more. Looked at from another perspective, however, the fact that the Rise of the West paradigm does not include plunder in its definition of capitalism skews its interpretation of US relations to the Middle East. What we ought to be doing is studying the interface of the US with the Middle East not as a part of development studies as the one approach urges but as a part of plunder studies as the other one does. Otherwise what Oliver North or Erik Prince or Dick Cheney or Ahmad Chalabi are doing does not make sense.

Well, if plunder is playing the role one might think it does, someone has to be carrying it out, not simply the initial spilling of blood done by the New Men, referred to above, but the ongoing year in year out imposition of inequality. Here, to repeat, one finds the explanation for why the Third World ruling class is a part of the rich. Why the 9-11 families cannot sue the Saudi royal family, why so many powerful Middle Easterners live comfortably in Europe or the US, doing who knows what. The Third World ruling class earns its position in the modern world power system.

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I will conclude here by going back to an earlier point, that my quest for an alternative approach over some years now owes a great deal to the period of time in which Rifa'at helped me in the years 1975-79 to better think out the argument of the *Islamic Roots of Capitalism*.<sup>6</sup> Rifa'at has gone even further with his current work-in-progress on *kafala*, simply abandoning the notion of the traditional narrative of state power and assuming that power is diffused in the world not randomly but predictably, and that it is diffused to such an extent that it is not even meaningful to speak of "a" narrative of power. I am still learning things from Rifa'at, and I am still grateful for the opportunity to do so.

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6 Peter Gran, *Islamic Roots of Capitalism: Egypt, 1760-1840* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1979).