

## **In Memoriam**

**Raouf Abbas Hamed**  
**1939-2008**

Raouf Abbas Hamed, professor of Modern History in Cairo University, and President of the Egyptian Society of Historical Studies, was one of the most prominent historians in Egypt and the Arab world. He remained active in the field for more than forty years, producing a large number of publications, staying involved in public life, and in recent years, taking an active stand for academic freedom in Egyptian universities and against corruption in public life.

Raouf Abbas belongs to the first generation of Egyptian social historians, who emerged in the late 1960s. He helped to move the focus from political and diplomatic history to social history. Early in his career, he wrote the first documented history of the Egyptian working class and of labor unions. Before that time, the subject of the working class had been regarded as belonging to the domain of Leftist writers. It was a subject that he came back to in a number of articles in later years.

In the years following the 1952 Revolution, it became possible to consult the newly established National Archives, opened to the public at a time when the revolutionary government's land reform laws were engendering a new interest in the land-owning class. Raouf Abbas, Ali Barakat and Assem Desouqi, his fellow-students and later his colleagues, all published studies analyzing in depth the history of private property, land tenure, and the emerging class of land owners in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century. At the time, this kind of history was largely unexplored and these young historians consequently had to tackle voluminous archives that had not been used before, and to establish the methodologies to use them. Their works have since become classics.

Raouf Abbas experimented with several other methodologies in many of his subsequent works, among them his studies of labor unions, the Egyptian communist party, the Muslim Brotherhood, and the Islamic movement. He made use of oral histories and private papers,

sources which were especially relevant for the study of such groups and movements functioning outside of, or in opposition to, the power structure.

In 1972-73, he was invited to Japan where he spent a year as a Visiting Fellow. This was followed by several other visits that made an important intellectual mark on him and his work. Not only did he learn to speak Japanese, but a number of publications resulted from these visits. One was a comparative study of two 19<sup>th</sup> century figures, Rifa'a Tahtawi and Fukuzawa Yukichi, both of whom were interested in the education of the young as a way of introducing Enlightenment thought from the West. This book tried to explain why two experiments with similar aims and starting at roughly the same time, had yielded different results. The study put into practice two methodological approaches. One of these was that of a comparative history of two different and widely separated regions. The other one was a move away from Eurocentrism to find parallels in two non-western regions of the world. Raouf Abbas was not only an academic historian. He was also socially committed. Through his numerous newspaper articles, public lectures, television appearances, and his commitment to the "March 9<sup>th</sup> Movement," he repeatedly called for academic freedom in Egyptian universities and for an end to corruption. Among his latest books in this domain were his autobiography, which became an intellectual best-seller, now running into its fifth edition, and a critical history of Cairo University. To the larger public, his name became associated with these calls for change and for social reforms.

In the last decade of his life, Raouf Abbas invested enormous efforts toward the development of the Egyptian Society of Historical Studies. He located donors and found funds to construct larger premises for the association, giving the Society's activities new life. He encouraged a younger generation of historians to establish regular seminars, the most prominent being the Ottoman seminar, which has met once a month for the past fifteen years.

He gave much of his time to students. To many beginning students coming to Egypt from Europe and America over the years to start their research, Raouf Abbas was the first stop, often the only address that they had when arriving. Many of them remember his generosity and his good humor, as well as the valuable advice he had for them on the availability of sources, where to find them, who to contact, and many more fundamental issues that started them off in their own research.

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