

Cornell H. Fleischer's (1950-2023) Journey*

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A time of joy and fulfillment in the life of Cornell H. Fleischer

It is June 2008, and Cornell H. Fleischer, Kanuni Süleyman Professor of Ottoman and Modern Turkish Studies at the University of Chicago, is in Bosnia to attend a conference organized by his beloved student Snjezana Buzov. In the picture on the next page, he is in Mostar, near the famous bridge, during a field trip that also included a visit to Blagaj Tekija.

Cornell came to the conference from Istanbul by car, following the path of Evliya Çelebi, reading passages of the *Seyahatname* along the way. For him, the conference is an ideal gathering of hearts and minds. It is held in the Orijentalni institut u Sarajevu, whose building and collections were destroyed during the siege of Sarajevo in 1992. Being there is not only an academic act, but also one of ongoing solidarity with Bosnians. Moreover, the conference brings together Turkish, American, and Eastern European scholars across a few generations, which is something he particularly values, because he sees them as members of an extended family. The convivial atmosphere continues beyond the Institute, as intense discussions are followed by long walks around the city, elaborate meals, and UEFA Euro 2008 matches on TV. He feels fully in his element. In the remaining decade and a half of his life, he will remember this time with fondness.

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Family and education

Cornell Hugh Fleischer was born on October 23, 1950, in Berkeley, California, as the only child of Hugh and Florence Fleischer. He died of complications related to interstitial lung disease on April 21, 2023, in his home in Chicago.

Cornell's family roots on his father's side went back to East Prussian lower nobility. His ancestors moved to Scandinavia towards the end of the Thirty Years' War (1618-1648). A few Fleischers migrated from Norway to the United States around the mid-nineteenth century, living in Wisconsin initially, and then dispersing around the vast American landscape, like so many other migrants. Hugh died in 1982, of Alzheimer's disease. Florence lived a full life until her early nineties, renewing her driver's license shortly before her death in the summer of 2014.

Cornell grew up in the company of two remarkable parents. Florence was plain-spoken, extremely smart, always witty, while Hugh was the personification of the thoughtful, well-educated diplomat with serious intellectual interests. When Cornell was seven, the family moved to Egypt, and two years later to Iraq, two places that were to shape Cornell profoundly. Due to Hugh's work, they also lived

in Japan and Germany, with stays in the US between postings. Unlike most foreign service families, Hugh and Florence preferred to live outside the embassy compound, thus giving their son a precious lesson in engaging with people from diverse cultures and backgrounds, beyond the confines of the life of American expats.

Cornell received the best education available wherever he went. He attended international schools in Cairo and Baghdad, in the company of children speaking various languages and representing different nationalities. He also attended the elite Phillips Academy in Andover, where he was put off by the shallowness of his fellow students and their privileged backgrounds. He proudly mentioned that he eventually graduated from the General H. H. Arnold High School in Wiesbaden, Germany, where he studied with the children of American soldiers and diplomats.

Upon high school graduation, in 1968, Cornell went to Brown University and immersed himself in nineteenth-century European literature in English, French, and German. Something happened, however: he felt this was a form of European/Western navel gazing, and a narcissistic exercise. At this juncture, memories of a childhood spent in Egypt and Iraq came back, not as nostalgia, but as a key to a path forward. Even though he remained a devotee of good literature for the rest of his life, he transferred from Brown to Princeton to focus on Arabic and Near Eastern Studies. He received his AM in 1972, AM in 1976, and PhD in 1982, from the Department of Near Eastern Studies.

As a child in Baghdad, one day, Cornell had watched a group of Iraqi children gather at the doors of the US embassy compound. He wanted to go out and play with them, but he was not allowed. He remembered his feelings of sadness and anger, and his sense of a tremendous opportunity that was missed, for the rest of his life. Unable to mix up with those Baghdadi children and play to his heart's content on that day, he did the next best thing: to study their language and history, without ever losing the notion that they were his equals, peers, comrades.

At Princeton, meeting Martin Dickson was a life-changing moment. Thanks to the guidance of his teacher, Cornell came in touch with a more holistic view of Islamic Studies as an expansive field that covered multiple continents as well as languages and cultures. Throughout the 1970s, as he improved his Arabic, he also learned Persian, Ottoman, and modern Turkish. From his undergraduate studies onwards, he was interested in the histories of all Islamic societies, from eastern and southern to western Asia, southeastern Europe, and Africa. Another component of his learning was the time he spent in Turkey, Egypt, Iran, and Afghanistan. He

deepened his personal connection to those lands and their communities during that formative decade. He knew he was seen as a “foreigner” due to his blond hair and blue eyes, but he never felt, or acted, like one.

Career

Cornell’s first regular teaching gig was to offer Islamic history at Boğaziçi University during his stay in Istanbul between 1976 and 1979. His first wife Kay (née Fryklund), whom he met in Egypt in 1972, taught English at the same institution. Together, they lived the life of an underpaid, overworked, yet hopeful young academic couple. Upon their return to the United States, Cornell taught Turkish, Arabic, Persian, and the occasional Islamic history course at the Ohio State University. Working at a major public university whose students came from radically different backgrounds compared to those at Brown and Princeton was another eye-opening moment. This was a time when he often witnessed a rather mundane, all-pervasive racism directed at Muslims and Islamic cultures at large. He began to develop a sense of mission during those years: to alter American perceptions of Islam, indeed what he considered as a belligerent ignorance of Muslim societies in public discourse and academic circles alike.

Upon receipt of his PhD, Cornell obtained a tenure-track position as assistant professor of history at Washington University in St. Louis, where he soon found the opportunity to help create a community of fellow scholars. A significant outcome of his efforts was the establishment of the Center for the Study of Islamic Societies and Civilizations in 1988. This was also the year when he received a so-called “genius” grant from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, perhaps the most prestigious form of recognition of one’s work and scholarship in the United States. He proceeded quickly through the ranks of American academia. He received tenure in 1985. He published his dissertation as *Bureaucrat and Intellectual in the Ottoman Empire: The Historian Mustafa Âli (1541-1600)* in 1986 with Princeton University Press, and he dedicated it to the memory of his father. He was promoted to full professor in 1989 before the age of 40, a rare feat.

At Washington University, through the Center as well as thanks to the visibility brought by the MacArthur fellowship, Cornell was able to promote his particular understanding of Islamic history and societies, which he had developed under the mentorship of Martin Dickson since his days as an undergraduate student. He argued against the overwhelming emphasis on philology in Islamic Studies and advocated for inquiries based on theory and method. His reputation

as an accomplished linguist gave his comments particular authority. He wanted his fellow scholars of Islamic history, and particularly the new generations, to be well-versed in area studies as well as a specific discipline. This was the best remedy against the damages of Orientalism, he believed.

Cornell remained true to his words after he transferred to the University of Chicago in 1993. He received a further recognition in 1998 as he became the inaugural holder of the Kanuni Süleyman Professorship of Ottoman and Modern Turkish Studies. As a member of the Departments of Near Eastern Languages and History, and an affiliate of the Center for Middle Eastern Studies, he helped train many among the new generation of Ottomanists and Islamicists. He was supported by the generous provisions of his chaired professorship, which allowed him to focus on graduate training. He had graduate students at Washington University, but he became a veritable “hocaların hocası” at Chicago, following on the footsteps of his illustrious predecessor Halil İnalçık. His two-quarter seminar on early modern Ottoman history became a cauldron of ideas and insights on Ottoman, Islamic, Mediterranean, European, and world history. Even during what would be the final months of his life, he offered a reading course built around one of his favorite texts, the autograph *Münşeat* of Celalzade Salih.

Scholarship

Cornell was a true historian beyond any field or specialization, in the sense that he felt we are in constant dialogue with the past, with the future, with time, space, and events. Every single relic of the past was important to him, from a marginal note in a manuscript to a seemingly minor entry in an expense register.

While he is mostly known as an Ottoman historian in Turkey and beyond, Cornell was a scholar of the Islamic world in the mold of Marshall Hodgson. For him, Ottoman history was a particularly relevant, rich, enjoyable case to study. He could comfortably navigate among sources of Islamic history in several languages, using his broader knowledge to create a more profound understanding of the Ottomans. Similarly, he was familiar with European, central Asian, and south Asian history, their methodologies, and sources. In a way, he made his own job, and the job of his students, quite difficult. At the same time, a different kind of analysis eventually emerged from what initially looked like an impossible enterprise scattered across disparate fields, disciplines, languages, and sources.

Cornell indeed kept an open mind, a keen eye, and a wide perspective on all of historical scholarship. At the same time, he was confident in the relevance of

Ottoman and Islamic history, and he did not feel compelled to make them fashionable for easy consumption and quick recognition. He half-jokingly claimed that he might be considered a *müsteşrik*. When he was asked, in jest, whether he was related to the nineteenth-century German Orientalist Heinrich Leberecht Fleischer, he replied, in his inimitable Turkish: “sadece meslek ve meşreb itibariyle.” Still, quite often, his graduate students ran both the Early Modern History Workshop, focused mostly on Europe, and the Middle East History and Theory Workshop. He attended both regularly, always ready to comment on anything from the Protestant Reformation to the Sunni-Shiite division.

Cornell’s reputation later in life was somewhat clouded by the “curse” of having written a first book that was a masterful, inimitable, groundbreaking work of history. He, and his students, were often asked what was next, sometimes genuinely and at other times rather disingenuously. In all his honesty, Cornell often said that his graduate students continued his work and took it further than he himself could. At the same time, it is undeniable that his *Bureaucrat and Intellectual in the Ottoman Empire* is and will continue to be one of the milestones of Ottomanist, indeed historical scholarship in the second half of the twentieth century. It would not be farfetched to place him in the company of his contemporaries and fellow early modernists Carlo Ginzburg, Natalie Zemon Davis, and Mercedes García-Arenal, whose works are widely read beyond their own fields, and whose scholarship reflects a similar sensitivity and depth.

Cornell’s interests in the study of the reign of Süleyman and of apocalypticism are well-known. While he did not publish much on either topic in the traditional sense, he did enough to offer comprehensive approaches to both. His long book synopsis on the reign of Süleyman, which he readily shared with his students, is to date the best conceptual and thematic reimagining of the period. His “A Mediterranean Apocalypse: Prophecies of Empire in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries,” published in the *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* in 2018, packs as much information and insight as a regular book or two within the space of a long article. With the exception of his work on Abd al-Rahman al-Bistami, on which he widely lectured, and which kept him busy even during his final challenging years, his oeuvre is nearly complete.

Without sacrificing objectivity, Cornell empathized with the subjects of his study. His lifelong interest in literature, his vivid imagination, and his extremely sharp intellect allowed him to do so while remaining a historian first and foremost.

He found instances of experimentation, novelty, and intellectual speculation as particularly worthy of study, even though he never discounted the impact of tradition. He comprehended Süleyman's imperial vision in all its intricacies. He also understood the aspirations of low-ranking Ottoman bureaucrats. He recreated the intellectual and spiritual world of an ambitious geomancer who sought favors first in the Safavid and then the Ottoman court. He conversed with Mustafa Âli for decades, bringing back to life a very bright, somewhat irritating, constantly unhappy litterateur whose experiences and writings offered a conduit into the human condition. He found, in the apocalyptic fears and messianic expectations of a troubled age, a tableau of human frailty as well as grandeur.

While Cornell led the life of a committed scholar, he found the walls of academia constricting, and he got out whenever he could. When, in the early 1990s, Bosnian Muslims were subjected to the worst violence on the European continent since 1945, he lent the authority of his recent MacArthur fellowship and his stature as historian to their help, often appearing in media. He volunteered to monitor the first free elections in Bosnia after the end of the hostilities and remained committed to the support of a continued and meaningful Bosnian Muslim presence in Europe. After September 11, when the University of Chicago became a hotbed of discussion and controversy because of the connections of many alums with neoconservative circles, he once again walked into the breach. He often joined panels and roundtable discussions, where his identity as the son of a US diplomat who grew up in the Middle East, and his stature as one of the prominent historians of the Islamic world, gave him a critical voice that resounded strongly, to the detriment of his less-equipped interlocutors. He was always willing to criticize American aggression, not only for the sake of criticism, but for advocating, once again, for a better understanding of Islamic history and societies. As a lifelong progressive, he did not have much patience for any kind of narrow-mindedness at home and abroad.

In the company of Cornell H. Fleischer

Cornell was an impressive and quite unique person. He was born with a disability, which prevented him from having full use of his left arm. He must have learned to surmount this severe difficulty early on. As a child, he persevered as a boy scout to reach the rank of Eagle Scout, the highest and most difficult one to achieve. As an adult, he carried himself with grace and determination. He refused to see himself as having a disadvantage, and led a full life unlimited by his physical

condition. He surfed as a young man and had ski holidays until his early 50s. He was an avid and skilled driver, often at odds with parking enforcement. He could have received a disabled tag, which would have saved him from the countless tickets he received for parking in forbidden zones while running quick errands, but he didn't want the special treatment, and quite likely the visibility that it brought.

Cornell saw himself as part of a community of scholars, intellectuals, thinkers, writers, but also misfits, marginals, esoterics, and malcontents of all ages. He began his famous Ottoman history seminar by talking about his teachers, their teachers, and a broad intellectual lineage. He did so inclusively, making the attendees feel they were now being ushered into that illustrious company. He stayed in touch with people from Egypt, Iraq, Iran, Turkey, and Germany, whom he had met in his childhood and youth. His graduate school and early-career acquaintances turned into lifelong friendships. He regularly communicated with a group of MacArthur fellows, and some of his comrades there included a famous poet and a leading specialist of tropical butterflies and frogs. Everyone who knew him well got to know, at least through anecdotes, his friends.

Cornell could be very shy, something that might be mistaken as being distant, reserved, or even arrogant. Rather, he was quite humble. He never felt his achievements gave him a particular standing. He summed up his sense of collegiality and personal work in his acceptance speech of a medal from the president of the Republic of Turkey:

Bugün burada bu nişana layık görülen faaliyet sadece tek bir kişinin başarısıyla sınırlı değil. Bu nişanı bizden önce gelenlerin kurdukları ve geliştirdikleri, yılları aşan ve farklı coğrafyalara yayılan bir zümrenin bir mensubu olarak, bu zümre adına da kabul etmek isterim.

His modesty extended into his relationship with his students. While working on primary sources, he was always the first to crack open a dictionary. He did not want to impose by suggesting research topics that might go against his students' interests or abilities, even though many at the beginning of their careers found this liberty challenging. He empowered them to do their best within the subject of their own choosing. He also encouraged them to talk to people from other disciplines and fields.

Cornell loved stories and anecdotes, and conversing with others, increasingly on the phone as old age, distance, and the pandemic isolated him from his close

circle. He spoke many languages well, with tremendous refinement and nuance, but also with a command of the colloquial style. His delivery and vocabulary somewhat changed with the language he spoke. He was reserved and formal in English, ironic and direct in Arabic, proper and learned in French, and intimate and creative in Turkish, thanks to his oceanic knowledge of Ottoman, which gave his speech a literary quality and depth. The same depth came alive in his written language, for which he solely preferred English, even though he could have written easily in several languages. (Incidentally, he wrote in a beautiful handwriting, in a flowing cursive in Latin, and a tidy *riqa* in Arabic characters.) Limiting himself to English gave his writing focus, precision, as well as sophistication, which some of his students jokingly yet seriously called the “Fleischerian style.” He did not judge others for small infelicities, but he was dedicated to the proper use of English, whose complicated Anglo-Saxon and Latinate background, and whose exposure to global influences rendered it the best form of expression for him.

The last years of Cornell’s life were marred by challenging family matters, declining health, and the impositions of the pandemic. Still, he did not become complacent, either professionally or personally. He remained political, critical of the world he lived in and his institution. He abhorred the increasing commercialization of higher education, the marginalization of the humanities, and the tokenization of non-Western cultures and societies. Even during what would turn out to be his final months, he kept up his hope. He entertained the idea of a trip to Istanbul, where he could see doctors for a second opinion. And his mood always lightened at the mention of a detail, any detail, related to Ottoman and Islamic history. That curiosity never left him.

Cornell was getting ready to retire in the fall of 2023, and he had begun to dream about moving on to the next chapter of his life. California, one of his childhood homes, looked like the most likely choice, even though his beloved Cairo and Istanbul also lingered at the back of his mind. The fact that he was contemplating retirement makes his death particularly lamentable for students and friends who survived him.

Cornell’s life was interrupted unexpectedly, yet his legacy continues.