

Timothy Mitchell, *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, Modernity* (Berkeley, CA: The University of California Press, 2002). Pp. 413.

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Rule of Experts is the most exciting and intellectually stimulating book about the Middle East to come my way in a long time. It is a brilliant set of interrelated essays about late nineteenth and twentieth century Egypt. Virtually every page is laced with theoretical insights – theory, that is, in the grand sense of social vision or at least critical dissections of other people’s visions. The book’s original subtitle, *Political Economies of Postcolonialism*, tells more about Timothy Mitchell’s enterprise than the publisher’s final set of keywords. “Postcolonial” here “refers to forms of critical practice that address the significance of colonialism in the formation and practice of social theory” (p. 7). Grounded in a postcolonial critique of modernization theory, the author is challenging us to rethink our categories of social understanding and escape the prison of nineteenth century thought as we move into the twenty-first. Nineteenth century social theory was, after all, embedded in colonialism and imperialism.

The book’s nine chapters are divided into three trilogies about early twentieth century “para-sites” of capitalism, peasant studies, and “fixing the economy” in recent decades. Three of them had already been published elsewhere, including a slightly revised and expanded version of “The Invention and Reinvention of the Egyptian Peasant” that first appeared in this journal (22: 129-50) in 1990. A new one, “The Market’s Place,” incorporates some fieldwork about a village economy done in 1996-1997. The theme that unites all of his chapters is the practice of modern expertise, whether in civil engineering, surveying, accountancy, administration, political science, or economics, for the apparent sake of development and modernization. Egypt, land of the pyramids and gift of the Nile, is fertile soil for these practices, already anticipated by the *Saint-Simoniens* working for Mohammed Ali in the early nineteenth century. In this sense *Rule of Experts* is a worthy sequel to Mitchell’s earlier work, *Colonizing Egypt*, and in fact improves upon it. He presents new material about Egypt’s landed estates in the mid-nineteenth century that enables him to trace the evolution of the “*izba*” from isolated temporary straw huts of seasonal laborers to the private village “where [as French scholars observed in 1930] the proprietor is the absolute master” (p. 70). The Hekekyan papers provide a map of a “model village,” a sort of nineteenth century Gulag of hierarchically arranged workers’ huts, rows of houses for the “middling classes of fellahs,” shops, etc. The landowner’s “Manor House” commands a strategic corner of the village; conveniently nearby are a row of lodgings for government officers and travelers and a “House of Prostitution” (p. 69).

Mitchell is at his best debunking the idea that private property emerged as some sort of natural evolution toward “Principles True in Every Country,” which is the ironic title of his chapter on the subject. The cotton and sugar crops implanted by Mohammed Ali and his successors to maximize export revenues had tremendous costs. The government had to impose a functional equivalent of the slave labor used for similar crops cultivated in the United States and the Caribbean. Private property whereby “the proprietor is the

absolute master” was the flip side of peasants running away from corvees and other exactions imposed by the authorities. Those that escaped lost the use of their land to the notables who were prepared to work with the government and keep the workers in line. The *muqabala* (“equivalent”) of 1871, rendered compulsory in 1874, exacted taxes that drove many cultivators into debt and had better be viewed as a penalty imposed upon them than as a property right they won for themselves (p. 67). Certainly control rather than productivity was the logic behind the large estates.

Mitchell argues that all of our categories of social understanding, such as private property, are rooted in social practices. They are not socially constructed, for that would already given them some sort of ontological status, but rather they are part and parcel of the social practices that they define. Thus producing cotton and sugar required forms of domination akin to that of slave labor camps. Private ownership of the *‘izba* was apparently more absolute than that of any contemporary homeowner, whose rights are conditioned by zoning laws, building codes, etc.

The economy, the object of the “fixes” of international financial institutions, USAID, etc., discussed in the third part of the book, is also, like private property, a problematic category. Mitchell traces its origins to British colonial practices in India, where John Maynard Keynes and others before him had to manage the circulation of money in an enclosed geographical space. Well into the twentieth century “economy” was equated with household stewardship or the efficient use of things, and “political economy” was synonymous with management or public administration. As an abstraction, “the economy” slipped into English usage only in the late 1930s, as empires were contracting and countries were becoming more isolated under the impact of the Great Depression. Promoted by economists like Keynes, “it came to refer to a self-contained structure or mechanism whose internal parts are imagined to move in a dynamic and regular interaction, separate from the irregular interaction of the mechanism as a whole with what could now be called its exterior” (p. 82). Economics, a discipline grounded in the statistics that were being collected in Egypt as elsewhere in the 20th century, finally acquired its principal object, a national economy. Mitchell might have looked further, in fact, into the *Statistique* component of the Société Khédiviale d’Economie Politique, de Statistique et de Législation founded in 1909. The practices of collecting statistics accompanied the new surveying and mapping of Egypt that he so carefully documents, and they were clearly, even linguistically, tied to state power.

Mitchell focuses upon the "kinds of social and political practice that produce simultaneously the powers of science and the powers of modern states" (p. 312 n. 77), and he revealingly contrasts his concerns with those of a fellow political scientist, James Scott, whose *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998) documented state misuses of the powers of science. Mitchell’s “techno-politics” is more elusive. In his words

Techno-politics is always a technical body, an alloy that must emerge from a process of manufacture whose ingredients are both human and nonhuman, both intentional and not, and in which the intentional or human is always somewhat overrun by the unintended. But it is a particular form of manufacturing, a certain

way of organizing the amalgam of the human and nonhuman, things and ideas, so that the human, the intellectual, the realm of intentions and ideas seems to come first and to control and organize the nonhuman (pp. 42-43).

For Mitchell an expertise like engineering has no autonomous scientific status: “the projects themselves formed the science” (p. 37), and the human agency associated with engineering only “seems to come first.” More fundamentally, “overlooking the mixed ways things happen, indeed producing the effect of neatly separated realms of reason and the real world, ideas and their objects, the human and nonhuman, was how power was coming to work in Egypt, and in the twentieth century in general” (p. 52).

In other words the author insists on a strange way of political theorizing that “avoids the method of abstraction from the particular that usually characterizes a work of theory.” So much does the theory lie “in the complexity of the cases” that Mitchell confesses his introduction to be “opaque” and “no substitute for what lies in the chapters themselves” (p. 8). Practice precedes theory, as Mussolini used to say against the Marxists. The problem with this postmodern approach to political theory is that it escapes any concrete politics and the sorts of systemic confusions Scott or the present reviewer (in *Images of Development: Egyptian Engineers in Search of Industry*, 2nd edition, Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1994) captured between political and scientific authorities. Although our categories of social understanding are subject to broad transformations of the sort Mitchell so brilliantly documents, we need to fix them for purposes of analysis when discussing concrete policy related topics such as land reform or economic adjustment. Floating above it all on a meta level, Mitchell tends to miss some of the real “techno-politics” or how in concrete cases various political authorities could manipulate professional associations and learned societies to legitimate various projects. As he says, he is not interested in the problems raised by political scientists because he prefers to analyze the genesis of the various disciplines that “frame” modern society and the violence that underlies the enframing.

Thus, returning to the peasants, he repeats the story of Richard Critchfield plagiarizing from Father Ayrout, a source who knew little about peasant life, and then he discovers evidence that may or may not be true from Marshal Amer’s Committee to Liquidate Feudalism about peasant bullies torturing and murdering their fellow villagers. This time the source, properly documented, is an appendix in Hamied Ansari, *Egypt: The Stalled Society* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1987), pp. 255-260. It summarizes a memorandum signed by the commander of Military Criminal Investigations concerning “the feudalist Ahmad Hasan Abdun,” a Wafdist deputy from Sharqiyya before 1952. The reader may still wonder whether Amer’s military police, while vividly documenting the violence that Mitchell needs for his enframing theory, is not as artful a fabrication as Critchfield’s. Still, Mitchell is right to observe the squeamishness toward violence of most political science fieldworkers and also to raise serious questions, transcending Critchfield’s possible CIA connections, about the structure of academic expertise that enabled his prejudiced work to achieve widespread acceptance.

In this reviewer’s opinion, however, Mitchell’s critique of the generations of engineers, primarily British and Egyptian, who tamed the Nile and converted much of the

Nile Valley from basin irrigation derived from the annual flood into perennial irrigation, also tends to be prejudiced. Offsetting the well known ecological arguments against the various dams at Aswan and the adverse consequences of more disease and salinity associated with a more intensive use of the land without adequate drainage are the positive gains of productivity and human welfare that accompany steady supplies of water. Within a decade of the filling of Lake Nasser behind the High Dam, the reserves saved Egypt from what would otherwise have been a very painful drought.

Mitchell will amuse his readers by pointing out the flaws of those less than exact modern disciplines, be they engineering, surveying, or development economics, but are we to conclude that they are somehow less than legitimate? Take economics, for example. The models of the economists never quite correspond to reality, and Mitchell correctly points to the many “externalities,” “market inefficiencies,” and the like that wreak havoc on efforts to isolate “the economy” from its unruly environment. The economy may indeed be a “fabrication” that is never quite “complete” (p. 301) because family disputes, fraud, secrecy, and other matters are always messing it up. How, for instance, can we quantify of the costs of sustaining family networks that, if left unattended, may have devastating consequences such as the collapse of Egypt’s largest privately owned bank? (p. 293) Mitchell concludes, however, not only that the economy is “incomplete” but that “economic discourse works very hard to help format and reproduce the exclusions that make the economy possible” (p. 301). Are we to conclude, then, because IMF and USAID reports “exclude” politically sensitive matters such as military expenditures and mention of dominant families that economics is somehow fraudulent?

Is there no longer room in the postmodern, postcolonial world for human agency to keep striving for ideals of truth and exactitude even if they can never quite be attained? Mitchell’s epistemology rejects the sorts of dichotomies between concepts and reality on which such striving depends. Rather than painting “gray on gray” as Hegel tried to do, Mitchell abolishes all distinctions when he rejects fixed categories (even provisionally fixed ones for a particular historical period) of social understanding and rejects the idea that we can evaluate the correspondence of our concepts to any reality. His critique of “techno-politics” is meta-political, not political in the sense of analyzing clashes between different forms of authority. At the meta level neither disciplines nor states have authority or legitimacy.

Yet “techno-politics” does connote a style and way of thinking about Egypt shared by Gamal Abdel Nasser and his successors, the World Bank, and USAID. James Heaphey, who is not cited in Mitchell’s extensive bibliography, captured it already in 1966 in the title of his *World Politics* article (18:2, pp. 177-193), “The Organization of Egypt: Inadequacies of a Nonpolitical Model for Nation-Building.” The image of the overpopulated little country strung up the Nile into a tiny fan-shaped delta all surrounded by vast empty desert turns any politics into a problem of managing scarce resources, rather than distributing them equitably. Mitchell usefully attacks the traditional hydraulic society image of Egypt along with the plans of international financial institutions and USAID to “fix the economy.”

But an alternative he proposes seems equally removed from the political realities of the Egyptian countryside. Let everybody eat less meat and import less grain and grow less berseem for the cattle so as to resolve the issue of food security. As it was, by this reviewer's calculations from *World Development Indicators* the population of cattle indeed increased at annual rate of 3.8 per cent between 1965 and 2001, compared to only 2.3 per cent for the people, so that it was perhaps natural for "Egypt...now [to be] growing more food for animals to consume than for humans" (p. 217). Is it not normal, however, for people with a rising per capita income to be spending more on meat? Mitchell would question any such norm, observe the interest of US agro-business in increasing Egyptian meat consumption, and encourage other forms of protein consumption for these people. But how can Egypt be isolated from world trends and what would be the local consequences of reducing meat consumption? What would happen to the village women whom Ray Bush, *Economic Crisis and the Politics of Reform in Egypt*, Boulder, CO.: Westview, 1999, (p. 43) observes to be the principal beneficiaries of the berseem-fed cattle on the smaller properties?

Mitchell agrees with Bush, however, on the importance of "the subsistence household as a form of production" (Mitchell, p. 268) and the need to limit most large or medium property holdings drastically, either to three (pp. 220-221) or to five feddans (1 feddan = 1.038 acres). Economic liberalization as advised by USAID and the international financial institutions has tended to work in the other direction, reversing the 1952 Agrarian Reform's tenancy rights with violent consequences (pp. 264-265) as if to illustrate Mitchell's enframing theory. Ironically, too, deregulation led to increased production of staple crops (including berseem) at the expense of those supposedly more valuable vegetables and other export crops. Readers may also be amused to discover how Egypt saved billions of dollars by growing local hemp (*bango*) to substitute for imports of Lebanese hash (p. 288). There is much more to tell, and this book will surely be required reading for most students and faculty in Middle East studies.