BOOK REVIEW: Timothy Mitchell’s *Rules of Experts—Egypt, Techno-Politics, Modernity*

The Egyptian Peasant—The Hero of the Past, the Hope for the Future
Heba F. El-Shazli, Virginia Tech
heba@vt.edu

How much has really changed in Egypt? While the Arab Spring made headlines and determined demonstrators took over Tahrir Square and the cable news, one might question: Are the resulting changes to Egypt of depth or only superficial? Ten years after it was written, Timothy Mitchell’s 2002 book, *Rule of experts – Egypt, techno-politics, modernity* still has much to tell us today. Timothy Mitchell, a British born political scientist, is an avid student of the Arab world. He is a professor of Middle Eastern Studies at Columbia University.¹

Though much on the surface appears to have changed in Egypt in the aftermath of the Arab uprising that began in December 2010, far reaching economic reforms need to be explored through the eyes of technology and politics. This is the genius of Mitchell’s book. It remains a must-read for anyone interested in the issues of economic development, the economy, the effects of colonialism, and technology and politics as it relates to development. Mitchell uses Egypt as an example to demonstrate several important theories and concepts. First, he examines the economy vs. economics² without

---

¹ Columbia University, Curriculum Vitae, [http://www.columbia.edu/~tm2421/](http://www.columbia.edu/~tm2421/)
² Economy vs. Economics: This book examines the making of the economy (historical development). The economy “can be understood as a set of practices that puts in place a new politics of calculation” (Mitchell 8) while economics is an illustration, a representation of the discipline. Economics offers an illustration of the possibility of social science taking certain historical experiences of the West as the model for a universal knowledge (Mitchell 7).
the heavy jargon and theories which can cloud the basic issues using clear case studies. Second, Mitchell examines the broader issues of the economy, its genealogy, raising questions about the politics of it within the context of the 19th through the 21st centuries. He presents a collection of inter-related essays that gives us an opportunity to consider what is meant by “expertise.”

With its networks and ties, economics has become a global form of knowledge.\(^3\) The chapters in the book have a broad range, covering history, social upheavals, political change and theory, violence, law, capitalism, problems with social calculation, and expertise (or at times the lack of expertise).

Mitchell uses the theories of Marx, Foucault, Ricardo, Mill, and many other well-known theorists to guide his inquiry and support his major points about Egypt’s economic and political development. He brings this expertise to bear on the situation in Egypt starting from the British invasion and occupation in 1882 until the 1990s and the Mubarak era. The book is divided into three sections: (I) Para-sites of Capitalism, (II) Peasant Studies and (III) Fixing the Economy. Mitchell delights in playing with words and their meanings to make serious points and at times to bring home a tough message. For example, in the first section, the aptly named Para-sites of Capitalism, he examines a series of global forces all coming together in rural Egypt, such as “technology, science, imperial power, and capitalism – and asks how one might understand the working of

---

these different forces in a way that avoids lending to any one of them a logic, energy, and coherence it did not have."\(^4\)

Mitchell does not want to give capitalism the credit for what happened in rural Egypt. Rural Egypt became an experiment in moving from a feudal system to a supposedly “more equitable” socialist land-reform style of agriculture. The Egyptian peasant was given a small plot of land after the implementation of the grand land reform program that began in September 1952\(^5\), though not always with the necessary support of financing, seed, fertilizer, etc. The Egyptian peasant fell into another cycle of debt and this time to government cooperatives thus continuing the colonial practice in post-colonial times.

Mitchell writes about how a capitalist mindset and actions were first and foremost. He illuminates this with one example of dealing with the problem of an infestation of mosquitoes in the countryside. He cleverly uses the vantage point of the mosquitoes in chapter one, “Can the Mosquito Speak?,” giving us needed insight into Egypt’s state of political, economic and social affairs through an instance where a specific species of

---

\(^4\) Mitchell, 14.

\(^5\) "In 1952 Nasser’s Free Officers passed Law 178, which limited land holdings to 200 feddans (84 hectares) per person. Owners were entitled to transfer up to 100 feddans (42 hectares) to their non-adult children and to sell the remainder on the open market. A new law in 1961 reduced the limit to 100 feddans per individual and 200 feddans per household. In total, 15% of Egypt’s agricultural land was affected. By the end of the 60s, about 80% of this had been officially redistributed with full rights to 318,000 small farmers (17% of families dependent on agriculture); 25% of these farmers owned between one and five feddans. The reform was social in motivation, and modest in its scope: the ceiling remained at 200 feddans per family, and the measures brought no benefits to the landless or to holders of less than 1 feddan. It never fully realised its objectives, since many large landowners managed, usually illegally, to keep possession of estates well exceeding the limits." [http://mondediplo.com/2007/10/10reform; “The struggle for land that never ends. The 1952 land reform,” Beshir Sakr and Phanjof Tarcir, Le Monde Diplomatique, October 2007]
mosquitoes caused a disastrous malaria epidemic. With this approach, he examines all the circumstances, actions, context that converged together in rural Egypt from the mid-1880s to the early 1900s. It is a classic example of how capitalism ruled the day to the detriment of society’s health and, in this case, rural peasant society where a majority of Egyptians lived.

Mitchell’s research is thorough. He examines every aspect of the political, economic and social context when it comes to the introduction of technology, violence and governance in modern Egypt. His evidence is presented clearly and particularly when he gives the reader the history of the “Great Map” of Egypt: the survey that took place to create the map, the new use of statistics and its political and economic implications, the new techniques of relating the land to the people, and the reasons for mapping Egypt. Furthermore, he presents the work by Ricardo, Mill and Marx and their influence on our understanding of what was taking place in Egypt, in addition to a presentation of the inimitable Egyptian peasant who is the real hero of the book.

Mitchell carefully explored the factual and analytical inconsistencies found in major sources of Western bodies of research and scholarship. For example, in chapter four, “The Invention and Reinvention of the Peasant,” he gave a detailed account of Richard Critchfield’s lack of supporting citations of Father Ayrout’s work and his own connection, via his brother, to the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). Critchfield’s book was titled: Shahhat: An Egyptian. Critchfield was known as the “genius journalist,” be-

---

6 Mitchell, 84.
cause he was the first recipient of the MacArthur genius grant. He used a brand of reporting about rural agriculture referred to as “village reporting,” yet he made simple mistakes such as a lack of accuracy and verification. Miles Maguire wrote, “Critchfield’s case illustrates a significant gap in the methodological protocols that are used by journalists to get at the truth.” If the methodology is deficient, then the knowledge presented is questionable at best. His expertise is rightly challenged because of this lack of proper methodology. In chapter four, it is fascinating for Mitchell’s readers to become aware of what was going on behind the scenes and the not so apparent connections that could have affected Critchfield’s work.

Mitchell not only describes situations or occurrences such as the Gurna village and Egyptian architect Hassan Fathy’s folly, but gives insightful information as to the importance of what happened, why, who and the resulting effects. The discussion of Hassan Fathy’s “blind” foray into trying to rebuild village and peasant housing was another example of Mitchell’s careful research and analysis. In the last three chapters, he reviews US government agencies and international financial institutions’ poor analysis of Egypt’s true economic needs by failing to tie in the political needs and context from the 1970s until 2000. Mitchell correctly incorporates these into his analysis. One cannot have a meaningful discussion of economics without politics and vice versa.

The author strongly adheres to methodology, but the traditional models of international relations, political theory and economics do not always fit a country with tribal,

---

familial, and Islamic society without some accommodations and adaptations. The “one size fits all” mentality does not work and Mitchell is keen to ensure that we fully understand why.

In addition, in chapter five, “Nobody Listens to the Poor Man,” his qualitative methodology regarding the issues around rural politics and violence is strong and poignant. He writes that “the missing evidence is not simply a methodological problem that limits the feasibility about writing about everyday violence… [but] rather in a very basic way, in a culture of fear, meaning itself is made possible what is missing.”9 Thus, recollections, stories, and rumors of what happened or did not happen are to be considered – “it is the combination of violence and its recollection, of the absent and its representation, that constitutes the event.”10 By understanding the “hybrid” nature of the occurrence, we can become more considerate of the problem of political violence against the poor.

The political struggle in the countryside in the 1960s was of utmost importance, and I would still argue that it is still very relevant today. Though Cairo takes the main stage, one cannot ignore that Egypt is still basically an agrarian nation with approximately 60 percent of its current population living in rural areas.11 It is interesting to note that in Egyptian Arabic, Egyptians routinely refer to Cairo as “Egypt” (Misr or Masr) and vice versa. It is rare that the name “Al Qahira” (Cairo) is used in the daily vernacular.

---

9 Mitchell, 153.
10 Ibid., 154.
Max Rodenbeck in his book *Cairo, the city victorious*,\(^{12}\) celebrates that notion and gives the reader an excellent insight into the history of a capital city as the history of a whole nation. Mitchell delves into this linguistic discussion and its implications in chapter six, *Heritage and Violence*.\(^{13}\)

Mitchell refers to Giorgio Agamben’s *Homo sacer: Sovereign power and bare life*\(^{14}\) and its theories of exception to demonstrate that as states grow and expand, so does arbitrary violence against the people and particularly the rural inhabitants, in this case, the peasants.\(^{15}\) “At a minimum, it was a power to exclude others from taking or using certain things.”\(^{16}\) The “izba,” which is the country/rural estate, was encircled with a fence or wall, preventing the peasant from exercising his/her right of free movement beyond it. Mitchell brings in the politics of alienation using Henri Lefebvre’s work, *The production of space*, where land is transformed into an object to be fought over, owned and becomes a commodity in capitalism.\(^{17}\)

Mitchell’s writing about the need to destroy the old nation in order to create the new modern nation is quite interesting. He writes that one of the odd things about the arrival of the modern nation-state “was that for a state to prove that it was modern, it helped if it could also be proved that it was ancient.”\(^{18}\) The thwarted plan to demolish and rebuild a village called Gurna in Upper Egypt is strangely connected to the defense

---


\(^{13}\) Mitchell, 181.


\(^{15}\) Mitchell, 70.

\(^{16}\) Ibid.

\(^{17}\) Ibid., 79.

\(^{18}\) Mitchell, 179.
of a national heritage for Egypt to build a modern nation-state. He writes, “[T]o produce the nation required an act of violence, and in revealing this violence its victims bring to light the forces and instabilities that nation making brings into play.”\(^{19}\) The village of Gurna continues to exist with its inhabitants still playfully benefitting from their infamous reputation as tomb robbers. Despite the strong-armed power of the Egyptian state, the state was not able to remove the people or demolish their homes. The power of the peasants carried the day. It is fascinating to see an example of immense state power yielding to a small group of well-organized and determined people. Was this a foretelling of the people power witnessed in Tahrir Square bringing down Mubarak as a symbol of the strongman state? We can surmise from Gurna that Egyptians have long been standing up to authoritarian rule and that what happened in Tahrir square was a tipping point foretold by all these smaller conflicts.

Mitchell’s writing is clear and engaging even to the reader who is not familiar with Egypt. He identifies the time periods with details about: who, what, how, and why. So even if one is not familiar with Mehmet Ali, the “father of modern Egypt,” one will learn about him and his role in Egypt. This book holds up well to other books on “technopolitics” – the intersection of politics and technology. The use of which to achieve political goals has been documented in such works by McLuhan, Mumford and Innis. Yet, after a brief review of the most prominent literature on peasant studies, especially from the *Journal of Peasant Studies*, it seems that Mitchell could have bolstered his research by

\(^{19}\) Mitchell, 205.
citing, in addition to James C. Scott and Fernand Braudel, other experts such as anthropologist Eric Wolf and Daniel Thorner (a student of Marx).

This book remains important because it clarifies the role of property, economic calculations, statistics, and rule of law, institutional exceptions, and the arbitrariness of native systems of rule. These are the topics of chapter two, Principles True in Every Country, and chapter three, The Character of Calculability, and they lend themselves very relevant to the study of politics, government and political theory in relation to Egypt and its development today. Modern property rights and their origins are the main discussion in chapter two, tracing the history from the laws of the Ottoman Empire which ruled Egypt since 1517.²⁰ Who controlled the land is still a pertinent issue today as it was back then. The relationship of the peasant, he who actually toils the land, and the landowner still carry fundamental issues of contention. Today, the peasant owns a few acres of land, yet he cannot afford to maintain it so he sells back or leases it to a wealthy landowner in the village and thus he returns again to working for the landowner – not for himself. The revolution or in reality the Free Officers’ coup d’état of 1952 had as one of its main missions the issue of land reform i.e. to re-distribute the land of large landowners among the peasants. Keeping the peasants (the majority) in their subordinated place is a tactic still in use today, and Mitchell does a good job in revealing the details of all the factors involved.

²⁰ Mitchell, 55.
Mitchell suggests that the Egyptian “economy was made”\textsuperscript{21} in the 20\textsuperscript{th} century. “The economy was an artifact, and like all things \textit{artifactual}, was made out of processes that were as much ‘material’ as they were ‘cultural,’ and that were as ‘real’ as they were ‘abstract.’”\textsuperscript{22} Mitchell gives the reader a genealogy of the economy while putting aside our initial notions of what an economy is by asking and answering: “How did those attempting to manage the political and economic problems of their times make senses of things?”\textsuperscript{23} We must consider living in a time when no one knows what will make up the components of the economy, in order to get a better understanding of what actually happened.\textsuperscript{24} The economy in Egypt materialized during the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, British colonialism, and heavy debts of the former Egyptian rulers.

Mitchell’s \textit{Rule of experts: Egypt, techno-politics, modernity} will be valued by both readers in Egypt and the Arab world and by Middle East specialists and economists. The readers will benefit from the multiple layered, well-researched and keen analysis of economics, techno-politics, the agrarian economy, and modern-day politics. At the beginning of his work, Mitchell called the economy a fabrication, but not to misunderstand this – he does not mean that the economy is a mere figment of our imagination – “it is an \textit{artifactual} body – a fabrication, yes, but as solid as other fabricated objects, and as incomplete.”\textsuperscript{25} The key word here is “incomplete.” The economic discourse of the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the US Agency for International

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 82.
\item \textsuperscript{22} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 83.
\item \textsuperscript{24} Mitchell, 83.
\item \textsuperscript{25} Ibid., 301.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
Development (USAID) fails to consider fully all the aspects of Egypt: the peasants, villages, leading Egyptian businessmen and the military. The peasant class is and has been the backbone of the country and its economy. They are rarely part of the narrative presented by these international organizations. With respect to the Egyptian military, much is left opaque and not transparent on purpose by the armed forces especially when it is related to their large industrial complex. It is a known fact that the Egyptian Armed Forces are major players in the industrial infrastructure and Egypt’s economy. The military has an “economic arsenal” of factories and enterprises that contributes greatly to the economy, employs thousands and brings in a tidy sum in cash profits.

The army is known to manufacture everything from olive oil and shoe polish to the voting booths used in Egypt’s 2011 parliamentary elections, but no one knows for sure how much of the country’s economy the military industries control. News reports have cited “expert” estimates that are all over the map, from 5 percent to 40 percent or more. Pushed by the New York Times to venture a guess, the former minister of trade, Rashid Muhammad Rashid, now in exile, offered “less than 10 percent.” The broad range of figures drives home the impossibility of measuring the footprint of what scholar Robert Springborg calls “Military, Inc.” Not only are army holdings classified as state secrets – reporting on them can land a journalist in jail – but they are also too vast and dispersed to estimate with any confidence.

The economic power of the Armed Forces is an important point to keep in mind, especially with the heavy-handed role of the Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF) in Egypt’s governance since Mubarak’s ousting in February 2011. Mitchell fails to analyze

---

26 Ibid.
the significance of the Egyptian military complex and the firm hold it has long maintained on the political and economic life of the country long before today.

Economic reform is on the minds of the policy makers and people in Egypt on a daily basis. Egypt is facing a continued decline in economic performance, high unemployment and continued perceived political instability even after the election of a new president. The SCAF is still firmly in charge with the new President Mohammed Morsi trying to carve out his space of political and economic influence. It still remains to be seen how this scenario will be played out. Mitchell writes that economic reform is a combination of theory and violence; the project of moving from a controlled to a market economy starting in the mid-1970s (Sadat’s open door policy) “required a series of framings, which attempted to fix and to exclude. Less than a decade after the project began, it has come apart.” 28 Today, what some experts have called the “economic success story” is still not sustainable, and there is a need to revisit this capitalist framework (that lacks transparency and accountability) and to include all the relevant economic actors - especially the peasants. Egypt has been and continues to be an agrarian-based society and economy, even though that smacks of “colonial thinking.” Nevertheless this reality needs to be faced, dealt with and taken into consideration when economic reform is being planned and implemented.

In conclusion, and using Mitchell’s words, “capitalism has no singular logic, no essence.”29 It survives like a parasite, taking up residence where it is not welcome, and

---

28 Mitchell, 301.
29 Mitchell, 303.
feeds on the fears and hopes of the weak marginalized groups of society and in the case of Egypt – the peasants. The Egyptian economy has arisen from many diverse economic and political systems; it is pulled by a variety of internal and external influences and is battered by the notion of capitalism and well intentioned, but naïve international aid. We cannot predict what may come, but one can be assured the Egyptian peasant, the hero of the past, is the hope for the future.