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**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**

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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.<sup>1</sup>

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. economics<sup>2</sup> without

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<sup>1</sup> Columbia University, Curriculum Vitae, <http://www.columbia.edu/~tm2421/>

<sup>2</sup> 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).



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these different forces in a way that avoids lending to any one of them a logic, energy, and coherence it did not have.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>, 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 mosquitos 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

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<sup>4</sup> Mitchell, 14.

<sup>5</sup> “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]

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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"<sup>6</sup> 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 Ayrou's work and his own connection, via his brother, to the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). Critchfield's book was titled: *Shahhat: An Egyptian*<sup>7</sup>. Critchfield was known as the "genius journalist," be-

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<sup>6</sup> Mitchell, 84.

<sup>7</sup> Richard Critchfield, *Shahhat, an Egyptian*. (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1978).

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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.”<sup>8</sup> 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,

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<sup>8</sup> Miles Maguire, “Richard Critchfield: “Genius” Journalism and the Fallacy of Verification”, *Literary Journalism Studies* (2009): 18.

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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.”<sup>9</sup> 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.”<sup>10</sup> 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<sup>11</sup>. 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.

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<sup>9</sup> Mitchell, 153.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 154.

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.tradingeconomics.com/egypt/rural-population-percent-of-total-population-wb-data.html>











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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."<sup>28</sup> 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."<sup>29</sup> It survives like a parasite, taking up residence where it is not welcome, and

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<sup>28</sup> Mitchell, 301.

<sup>29</sup> Mitchell, 303.

