

Rule of experts: Egypt, techno-politics, modernity by T. Mitchell; University of California Press, Berkeley, 2002, xiii + 413 pages, £35.00 \$49.95 ISBN 0-520-23261-5

Timothy Mitchell's new book is brilliant. Written for academics, it is not necessarily an academic book. Some of the chapters, such as "Can the mosquito speak?" or "The invention and reinvention of the peasant," could have easily appeared in the New Yorker or Atlantic Monthly. For the writing is superb. There are no verbal pyrotechnics, but the prose is luminous and limpid, undergirded by steely passion and resolve.

Mitchell's central passion is Egypt. It informs every page of the book, and I suspect every fibre of him as a person. He does what those old-style regional geographers suggest we do: to live and breathe our place of study, getting under its skin. His focus is rural Egypt, primarily from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century to the present. As a topic, it is not one that I have ever thought about, and certainly knew nothing of. But in his hands, it is riveting, standing in for many of the central changes that have shaped, and sometimes skewered, the modern world: colonial oppression, discourses of economy and calculability, the spread of disease and poverty, the power of science, structural adjustment, US foreign policy and the CIA.

Unlike those old-style regional geographers, however, Mitchell possesses an acute theoretical sensibility that illuminates his empirics. But this is not theory as a slab of citations and neologisms prefacing the study. His copious footnotes (occupying a quarter of the book) certainly tell you on whom he is drawing, but the theory itself is seamlessly worked into the individual studies: Latourian notions of hybridity in his examination of desert war, malaria and dam building during the 1940s, Foucaultian ideas of governmentality in his account of cadastral map surveying, money, and the collection of national statistics during the very late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and Gibson-Graham's anti-essentialist critique of the economy in his depiction of structural adjustment policies, USAID, and agricultural marketisation during the 1980s and 1990s.

That listing begins to point to Mitchell's intellectual inclinations, but they are difficult to group under any single rubric. There is a kind of theoretical surplus in his writings both in terms of the fecundity of his ideas, and their variety, and which means they continually escape any conceptual straightjacket imposed upon them. Certainly there is cultural analysis and concerned with interpreting texts of various kinds – official reports, letters from the archives, 19<sup>th</sup> century French and Egyptian monographs, census volumes, maps, diagrams, and architectural blueprints. Such texts then, to use one of Mitchell's favourite terms, enframe an issue, or practice, or policy, that is, shape it, set it in a particular direction, give it momentum. David Harvey (2000, page 5) recently argued, though, that while "cultural analysis" might be "fun," it is unable to get to grips with "the dour world and crushing realities of capitalist exploitation." But this is belied by Mitchell's book because while there is "fun" in Harvey's sense, Mitchell is deadly serious about the material world, and its frequently devastating effects on the everyday lives of rural Egyptians. So much of Rule of Expert is concerned with "the dour world and crushing realities of capitalist exploitation." But Mitchell would want to say that capitalism must be understood widely and expansively, with no single logic or essence, and dependent on a "noncapitalist excess" such as fear and violence, the household and family relations, and an assemblage of non-human agents. While it may "appear [that this] noncapitalist excess ... derails capitalism from

its course ... [such] excesses are at the same time vital to capitalism. They are a source of its energies, the condition of its success, the possibility of its power to reproduce. They are a heterogeneity that makes possible the logic of capital, and thus ensures both its powers and its failures" (page 303).

The economy is a central object of his investigation. I'm not sure that I believe him that as an object it emerged only in the mid-twentieth century, associated with Keynesian national accounting (but which as a practice, I would argue, is based on Marx's earlier scheme of reproduction, and before that Quesnay's *Tableau Économique*). But I think he is exactly right in suggesting that "the economy ... is embedded in economics" (page 118). By this Mitchell means, and which gets to the title of his book, that economics as a form of expert knowledge that prosecutes calculability, enumeration, and social abstraction becomes one of the ingredients that makes the reality of the economy possible, that enters into its very performance. As Mitchell writes, "Expert knowledge works to format social relations, never simply to report or picture them" (page 118).

Of course, expert knowledge is never innocent, and demonstrated brilliantly in my favourite of the chapters, "The invention and reinvention of the peasant." An exegesis of Richard Critchfield's 1978 volume *Shahhat: An Egyptian*, the essay is also a piece of detective work, a theoretical contribution, and a damning indictment of contemporary American government Middle-East policy. Critchfield, who later won one of the first MacArthur genius grants, clearly plagiarised sections of his book from Henry Ayrout's 1963 *The Egyptian Peasant*, and which in turn borrowed from turn-of-the-century writings of the French social psychologist, Gustave Le Bon. The enframing of the Egyptian peasant in these various works called upon the worst kind of Orientalism, removing any presence of colonial history. Critchfield's volume, though, was rewarded in the US by attention from agricultural scientists, Washington policy makers, students of development, and USAID officials, and he later received funding from the Ford and Rockefeller foundations. In a wonderful "Postscript," we subsequently learn that there is circumstantial evidence linking Critchfield to the CIA and the US politico-military establishment. More generally, this goes to Mitchell's wider point that "experts" such as Critchfield are not simply providing specialist knowledge about some facet of the world, but actively producing it.

The themes of Mitchell's book – power, hybridity, performativity, governmentality, calculability, and not least geography – in combination with incisive, compelling and lucid writing make *Rule of Experts* a critically important book for a critical human geography. Over the protracted and interrupted period I've read the book, I've inveigled everyone to whom I happened to speak to read whatever chapter I was then reading. I'm very glad finally to have an opportunity to recommend the whole book to everyone.

Harvey, D. 2000 *Spaces of Hope*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

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