

# EGYPT AND THE EXPERTS

Reading Timothy MITCHELL's abrasive *Rule of experts: Egypt, techno-politics, modernity* forces us to change our way of looking at development policies, experts from international organizations, the social sciences, Egypt's history following independence... Everything is interrelated; nothing is neutral. Mosquitos are more dangerous than tanks; the system of land tenure is a war machine; cartography underlies the economy; the CIA manipulates anthropology; "Egyptian peasants" have been invented simply to justify the West's "mission" in the Mid-East. To obtain a clearer view, we must decompartmentalize the social sciences and draw the natural sphere closer to the social one, and technology closer to politics

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« *Capitalism has no singular logic, no essence. It survives parasitically ... taking up residence in human bodies and minds, or in sugar cane or private property, drawing its energies from the chemistry of others, its forces from other fields, its momentum from other's desires* » (p. 303)

According to Tocqueville, the best way to understand a country is to visit its colonies. Timothy MITCHELL's *Rule of experts: Egypt, techno-politics, modernity*(1) convinces us that the best strategy for studying globalization is to concentrate on countries like Egypt, where the forces organizing the world economy are facing off. This interesting book is deeply original owing to its unusual way of wending through the social sciences. It never bores the reader senseless with abstract, theoretical ruminations. Nor does it ever lapse into anecdotes or a positivistic empiricism. Given its structure, the sites chosen for investigation and its attention to the credentials of the parties whose analyses of their own actions are presented, this book makes a unique history com-

prehensible and endows it with far-reaching significance.

To preserve this originality, I have chosen to review *Rule of experts* so as to describe as faithfully as possible its argumentation. Though sticking to the order of the chapters, my review(2) will not be linear as it follows the author's itinerary zigzagging through time and space. Not the least of the merits of this book is its focus on the role and impact of the social sciences. The first part leads us to discover Egypt's recent history by following three unusual guides: mosquitoes, land reform and the mapping of the country's surface area. These guides let us glimpse the forces that enter into the building of a society and economy.

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## THE MOSQUITO CALAMITY

"Can the mosquito speak?", the first chapter, thrusts us in the midst of a strange war in 1942. Foes abound.

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(1) Timothy MITCHELL, *Rule of experts: Egypt, techno-politics, modernity*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 2002.

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(2) Published in French in the December 2006 issue of *Gérer & Comprendre*, an earlier version having been printed in *Libellio d'AEGIS*, n° 2, February 2006.

Rommel's tanks have swept into Egypt but are soon vanquished thanks to the incredible mobilization of allied forces. However the tanks, which are definite targets that can be destroyed once and for all, are not the most dangerous. The real foes are weaving ties and setting off chain reactions that sap the country's vitality.

Take the example of the dikes and dams that Egypt was busily building during the years before WW II. By opening new areas for farming and attenuating the fertilization of the soil by the Nile, these projects made the country dependant on chemical fertilizers. By boosting cotton and sugar cane, which partly replaced food crops and necessitated chemical fertilizers, they intensified this dependence. This is the war's point of incidence, one unrelated to the easy target of tanks to be blown up.

The ammonium nitrate used for fertilizer was the main raw material for making explosives. Mobilized by the war effort, the chemical industry, especially in the United States, no longer supplied fertilizer. Famine set in. Since trouble never travels alone, *Anopheles gambiae*, a mosquito transmitting the malaria pathogen (*Treponema Plasmodium falciparum*), chose to attack the country at that very moment owing to an unexpected combination of circumstances. The entry of Japanese troops into Java interrupted exports of quinine and caused a shortage of the malaria drug. The situation was ripe for the mosquito and its larvae to colonize Egypt by setting up headquarters in the south and menacing the north. By itself, the mosquito would not have pushed the country over the cliff, but Egypt was already weak and sick. The mosquito fed on this weakness, thus setting off chain reactions that would further weaken the country and spark a political crisis. The larvae started proliferating in sugarcane fields, a breeding ground for it throughout the south – this being a distant outcome of the big hydraulic programs. The sap from the cane, consumed by those who harvested the sugar, made their bodies more hospitable to the malaria parasite. Thanks to recent improvements in transportation, things and people were moving faster. Egypt, after escaping the tanks, was losing its strength bite by mosquito bite.

This sociotechnical complexity no longer surprises social scientists. We now know that humans and non-humans weave relations with each other and that we cannot, therefore, *a priori* separate social forces or causes from natural ones. The combination of the two explains Egypt's unwitting plunge over the cliff. Politicians and experts isolated the foe (the mosquito and its larvae) and fought it as if it were independent of the other forces with which it was allied or on which it played. The modern machinery of "expertise" was set in motion. For it, problems are technical in nature and are to be solved technically, from a distance. This deepened the crisis.

However, many voices were raised contending that public health problems were, in the main, political problems and that the key question was land reform. Some even claimed that Egypt was caught between rich mosquitoes in the north and plain mosquitoes in the south. Experts, however, cannot be stopped once set in motion, especially not while US aid policy was moving in the same direction. Since there was a farm crisis, farming was to be improved; and fertilizers, spread by helicopter and through other state-of-the-art techniques. Since there was a health crisis, a building program was to be launched that used efficient brick-making techniques. Since there was an epidemic, campaigns for spraying DDT were to be carried out. Underlying these big, modernistic programs were the assumptions that the forces assailing Egypt were independent and that techniques were separate from politics. All these programs failed. Enemy forces formed alliances and interacted in unexpected ways, whence unpredictable problems. One from among a hundred other examples: the DDT used to eradicate mosquitoes was made from the ethyl alcohol produced by the very industry that was also using the sugarcane with the sap that helped the mosquitoes to breed!

By refusing to recognize these interrelations, by seeing the fight against mosquitoes like the battle against tanks, decision-makers and experts reinforced the interrelations between multiple factors, thus making it harder to manage them. Whoever wants to write this history must take into account not only the interventions by experts and policymakers but also the interrelations between the forces to be fought. The experts overlooked these interrelations, since they considered these forces to be independent. The social sciences would err in darkness if they remained blind to these sociotechnical patterns and separated, like the experts and decision-makers, the social from the natural sphere. Mosquitoes are as important as the war for anyone who wants to understand the Egyptian crisis. In other words, it is the coincidence between the two that accounts for this crisis. We must bring the work done by experts into the picture in order to understand this weird situation. As full-fledged players in the crisis – on par with the mosquitoes – their work lent force to the very foe against which they were fighting, because they took the mosquito to be a natural force outside the social sphere and incapable of interfering with it.

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## LAND REFORM

As this mosquito attack shows us, the configuration of forces explaining why certain events happen and why a certain momentum prevails is always unique. Although history never repeats itself, an article of faith in modernism states the very opposite, namely:

problems resemble each other and are to be handled in the same or nearly same way in all places at all times. This serves as the starting point for the second chapter, “Principles true in every country”.

The issue of private property, which the West has embodied in a universal principle or law, perfectly illustrates this conviction. For Westerners, private property is the cornerstone of civilization, a shield against the arbitrariness of powers-that-be (in particular the power of the government). A person is what he/she owns. We see why development policies have always, by and large, been associated with programs for imposing private property. Colonization can be interpreted as the often violent history of the setting up of a legal framework that recognized private property and provided for its defense and the possibility of transferring ownership rights.

This rhetoric is grounded on the postulate that property did not exist before the West invented and... imposed it. This postulate, we know, usually turns out to be false, and is false in the Egyptian case! As a review of history shows, the law on property, especially under the Ottoman Empire, had complicated refinements of the sort that Anglo-Saxon law had introduced into Roman law, which was a shining example due to its brutality and reductionistic simplicity. The ownership of, for instance, a piece of land did not generally entail an absolute right to the land and its produce. Mitchell has shown how complex, subtle and, we might say, modern this field of law was that created the conditions for more efficiency and justice. We might think we are reading the well-known definition given by Sir Henry Maine in the mid-19th century about property being a “bundle of rights”. The property rights imposed by colonial authorities did not exist in a vacuum; they destroyed and replaced institutions that were filled with intelligence.

Under these conditions, the recourse to force and violence comes as no surprise. The reason that Western property rights in their most brutal and stupid form (one thing = one owner) was such an important issue in Egypt is that sugar cane and cotton were the first experiments worldwide in industrial farming. Since the farmers did not consume these crops, force was to be exerted on them. In this respect, slavery was a key innovation. Populations had to be deported; and a nearly military discipline, brought to bear to keep rural-dwellers in place. In short, the situation called for what Foucault has described as a “government of populations”. The whole legislative, legal and police system was devised and used to prevent rebellions and desertions. Property rights came to carry weight. Mitchell has provided a luxury of details about these episodes, for example, how the revolts of Indian peasants against the British spread to Egypt, where prisons were soon overflowing.

“Desertion of the land and armed rebellion were not the only problems the new agriculture faced. The extensive irrigation works required by industrial crops brought two additional forces into play: disease and debt” (p. 65). Debt “was to provide a mechanism that would lever into place the new law of property, and with it the colonial occupation” (p. 66), a point recently confirmed by Julia ELYACHAR’s work on microcredit. A system where peasants keep working to pay off their debts has unequaled efficiency. It turns political protest into a list of individual grievances, while the insolvency of smallholders who have received loans serves as the grounds for distraints and expropriations. The advantage of large landholdings – and of owners to whom the government delegates the power to collect taxes – has nothing to do with higher productivity but, instead, with their effectiveness as a means for “fixing” the rural population. Before “fixing” the economy – turning it into a stable, manipulable, controllable object – the population has to be stabilized. This establishes the distribution characteristic of modern Western societies: for the state, the *imperium* of power over people; and for private landlords and proprietors, the *dominium* of absolute power over things. Like any major form of distribution, this one also feeds on interrelations of all sorts. Big landlords are literally private despots who design and build model villages, and supervise farmers’ everyday activities. Something resembling a labor market gradually emerges. Labor becomes mobile and can be mobilized since it has already been stabilized.

This metamorphosis, as Mitchell has emphasized, cannot be described as the state taking over rural society, since these two players are created at the same time. It is, therefore, hopeless to interpret the origins of private property rights as the painful but necessary application of a general principle imported from abroad – from “civilized countries”. As in any performative procedure, the declaration of these origins is itself part of the process: “Presenting the law of property as a conceptual structure whose origins lie outside actuality is part of a process that establishes the law in terms of this dualism” (p. 77). The new legal order does not free people from arbitrariness. Instead, it consolidates and, at the same time, modifies an arbitrary distribution of power. “The new legal order, rather than ending exceptional forms of control, created a thousand arbitrary powers” (p. 77). The idea of landed property played a key role in this dynamic concentration of powers. Modern Egypt thus took shape as a territorial and political unit, and a governable object. If our objective is to destabilize these dualisms, “then a critique that rests on a dialectical logic, however powerful, cannot serve” (p. 79). The law tells space apart from property, and then property apart from owner. Any dialectical analysis that adopts these categories is a part in the continuance of this performativity.

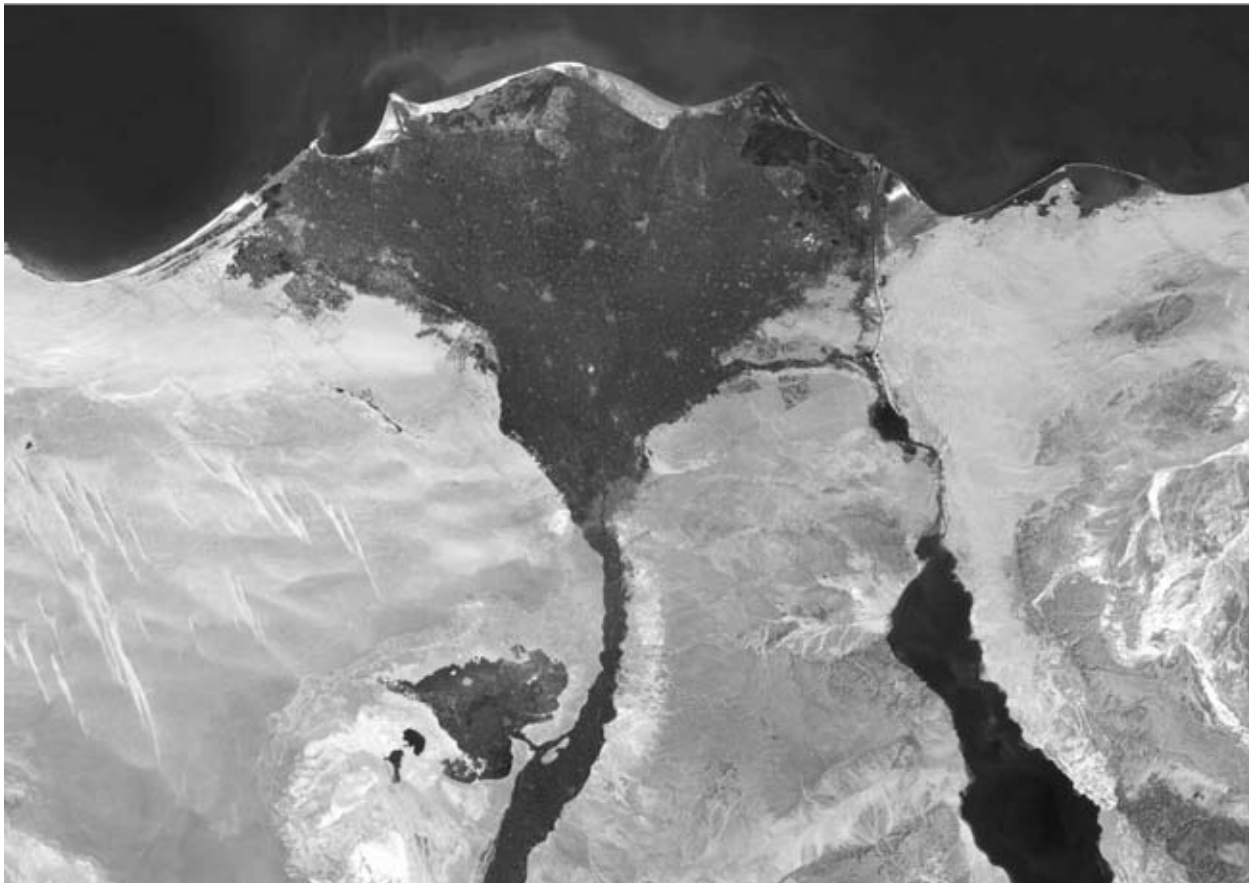


## HOW EGYPT WAS MEASURED AND MAPPED

Land ownership could not have been established without investments in methods for measuring, surveying and mapping the land. This is the subject of the third chapter, “The character of calculability”, where Mitchell has fleshed out the argument that the economy, as an autonomous reality and as a subject of

tinuing this experimentation and research under real conditions.

A driving force in making this new national economy, as Mitchell has shown, was the mapping, surveying and registering of the land. In 1909, the Khedival Society of Political Economy, Statistics and Legislation proposed a survey of landed property. For the first time, systematic statistics demarcated the national territory as a calculable space, thus bringing



Planet Observer/Hoa Qui/ EYEDEA

We hold a stereotype of Egypt, one repeated by specialists, as a narrow stretch of inhabitable land fertilized by the Nile overflowing its banks and depositing alluvium, where soaring population growth is making the situation worse.

knowledge and interventions (in particular, political interventions) – what I call the economy-as-a-thing hereafter – is a recent creation. He has dated it back to KEYNES’s *Indian currency and finance* (1913), a book, not well known in France, that took part in the great debate about whether or not the Indian and British economies were distinct from each other. Keynes provided an accurate, operational definition of a national economy, an old idea at the center of a controversy between List and Marx. He proposed restructuring imperial powers so as to provide them with new means of intervention. India was one of the first laboratories for working out and applying these theories, but not the only one. Egypt, where the French and British imperial powers were facing off behind closed doors, was an opportunity for con-

to light the relations between people and the land, and giving substance to the idea of landed property. Within ten years, more than twenty thousand maps were drawn, describing all farmlands, plot by plot. Cadastral maps had existed for a long time, but these new ones were based on precise land measures made by triangulation. They also contained information about owners and taxes. They had four advantages over the previous maps. First of all, they indicated the positions of land parcels and brought to light previously invisible information about, for example, untaxed plots. They fostered the idea of the nation as a space. Secondly, they recorded the coexistence of what was normal and abnormal by treating big and small holdings alike. Thirdly, the knowledge they provided could be put to use locally, as tax collectors took



measurements from these maps instead of surveying the land. Finally, owing to both their accuracy and focalization on certain problems and pieces of information, these new maps provided a substratum where the economy could take shape.

The economy-as-a-thing thus came into being. It finally had the solid foundation necessary for its establishment: “The map helped to constitute and consolidate the new institution of private property and the form of debt, title, dispossession and violence on which it depended” (p. 93). Other changes, made possible or easier thanks to the land surveys and maps, helped consolidate the economy-as-a-thing: private ownership of the land, the development of incorporated companies and the calculations having to do with cotton (Egypt’s main “economic” product). To this list should be added: the semi-public institutions set up for major projects; the sudden, rapid growth of metropolitan areas, which, according to Georg Simmel,<sup>(3)</sup> provided a space and framework for the monetary economy; and of course, the introduction of a single national currency. This movement of objectivation was amplified by Egypt’s status as a colony, designed as a self-contained reality. Separate from the rest of the world, it could be manipulated from afar and handled like a “case” with problems to be measured, analyzed and treated by applying knowledge and knowhow from the outside. The circulation of statistics increased the rift between the subject of these statistics and the ideas formed about it.

This making of a calculable subject of study ran up against enormous difficulties: inexact figures, the creation of a category of the population that could not be brought into the statistical picture because it did not own land, the impossibility of monitoring the movements of people and merchandise, etc. These imperfections and shortcomings sparked heated controversies about the mathematical procedures and statistical methods used to count the population, gauge demographic changes or calculate the national income. The Western techniques that used the farm as a statistical unit were inapplicable. These controversies arose in the context of colonialism: how to tell the Egyptian and the British economies apart?

The making of the economy-as-a-thing led to: shifting calculations and controls from the field toward a bureaucracy; creating a bifurcation between the center of calculability and the object being calculated; and setting off processes of organization, exclusion and reformulation that established the economy-as-a-thing, as a calculable object. At this point, Mitchell has resuscitated the well-known idea about the embeddedness of markets: “The economy came into being, not by disembedding market relations from a

larger social ground that previously contained them, but by embedding certain 20th-century practices of calculation, description and enumeration in new forms of intellectual, calculative, regulatory and governmental practice” (p. 118). The making of this “calculable space” did not prevent “overflowing”; nor did it eliminate the need for ongoing studies of the practices that, though mapped by the surveys, eluded surveyors and statisticians.

## THE UNCERTAIN EXISTENCE OF THE EGYPTIAN PEASANT

“Peasant studies”, the second part of this book, focuses on a major figure in Egyptian history, or rather on all those whose studies have turned it into a stereotyped but quite real player: the Egyptian peasant. To paraphrase Yves LACOSTE’s well-known statement, “Geography is mainly useful for waging war”<sup>(4)</sup>, we might say that anthropology is mainly (and till quite recently) useful for promoting the idea of the absolute originality of Western culture. This probably true formulation is, however, too vague and general. In the fourth chapter, “The invention and reinvention of the peasant”, Mitchell has turned toward the Egyptian peasant and anthropologists’ role in constructing this subject for study.

Mitchell’s inquiry brings him straight to Richard Critchfield, an unusual journalist with a passionate interest in the plight of peasants in Asia and the Near East. He wrote books that not only the general public but also specialists soon accepted as authoritative. His *Shahhat. An Egyptian*, published in 1978, was extolled in an impressive number of reviews and commentaries. *American Anthropologist* praised it for its outstanding portrayal of peasant life. Critchfield had a place on the syllabus in good anthropology departments in American universities. The book is simple and effective: it presents Shahhat as leading the life of a peasant who, uprooted from his traditional culture, lives through the tragedy of modernization, since peasants whose living conditions and ways of life have, supposedly, not changed for six thousand years were forced to adapt to modernity in less than a decade. This presentation of the clash between cultures and of the traumatic, forced march toward modernization is not at all original.

When peasant revolts broke out against occupants in Vietnam and Palestine, anthropologists were, Mitchell reminds us, requisitioned to explain this unexpected resistance. Who are these peasants? What are their traditions? What do they really want? Two other classics, by French-speaking authors, were

(3) Georg SIMMEL, “The metropolis and mental life”, translated by Kurt WOLFF in *The sociology of Georg Simmel*, Glencoe, IL, Free Press, 1950, pp. 409-442.

(4) Yves LACOSTE, *La Géographie, ça sert, d’abord, à faire la guerre*, Paris, Maspero, 1976.

written when colonial empires were discovering their weaknesses between the two World wars: *Les Paysans du delta tonkinois* by Pierre GOUROU (1936) and *Moeurs et coutumes des fellahs* by Habib AYROUT (1938). The latter by an Egyptian, who was enrolled as a doctoral student in France, became an indispensable reference work in the English-speaking world. Mitchell's meticulous analysis of *Shahhat* has no trouble proving that Critchfield often repeated phrases from AyrouT word by word, thus endorsing an approach permeated with an elementary exoticism and racism. In line with AyrouT, he did not avoid writing in 1978 (!) that Egyptian peasants were akin to animals because of their sexual violence. What Critchfield did not know was that, by plagiarizing, he was repeating the theories of Gustave LE BON who had influenced AYROUT. According to Le Bon, whose book *La Civilisation des Arabes* had come out in 1884, a society always opposes its elites who, unlike the masses, are capable of leading an individual existence and thinking for themselves. AyrouT applied Le Bon's astounding paradigm to Egyptian peasants: they could not exist as genuine individuals, since they were bogged down among their fellow creatures and amassed in villages – these “immoral assemblages” in need of reform. Critchfield did more than adopt this talented analysis. As a good amateur scientist, he overdid it owing to the supposed objectivity of his diagnosis. He constantly used the third person and said nothing about the interpreter without whom he could not have done fieldwork. After all, Critchfield was doing fieldwork in an Egyptian village without being able to speak a word of Arabic! He forgot to state that, during all the time spent there, he stayed in a luxurious hotel in a Western enclave, where he received Shahhat for interviews! Critchfield did not even mention the tourists who were everywhere, with whom he sipped cocktails to recover from the fatigue of his fieldwork.

Mitchell has investigated this unusual fieldworker. He contacted AyrouT's sister, who had outlived her brother. To his astonishment, he learned that AyrouT, an authentic Egyptian, had not spent a single day in the field while writing his dissertation on fellahs. An ethnologist who observed reality from his air-conditioned bubble had plagiarized an anthropologist who basked in the charms of Provence while drawing a portrait of the Egyptian fellah modeled on the aristocratic ideas elaborated by a French doctor who prided himself on his knowledge of the social sciences... Mitchell does not put an end to his inquiry at this point. It mattered little to him that Critchfield might have been a vulgar plagiarist. What did matter was the question: who benefitted from the crime?

By chance, Mitchell had worked for several years in a village near the one “studied” by Critchfield. While verifying locally what Critchfield said about “his” village, Mitchell was unsurprised to discover not only

that the book was a clever assemblage of excerpts from other sources but also that it was riddled with falsehoods. Mitchell has dipped his quill into the finest ink to describe the thorns on the rose. Critchfield, faced with so much proof, did not try denying the charges; he confessed. Pursuing his inquiry, Mitchell discovered strong family contacts between Critchfield and top officials in the CIA. By reconstituting the itinerary of Critchfield's anthropological fieldwork, he has easily shown that the choice of a place for a stint in the field was closely correlated with US military and diplomatic interventions. For instance, Critchfield studied Mauritius when the American government decided to set up a base on Diego Garcia – which led to a massive displacement of islanders forced to emigrate to... Mauritius. From these observations, Mitchell has been delicate enough not to deduce that Critchfield was a CIA informant or agent. As he well knows, what the social sciences had to say did not matter to the CIA. What the CIA did need was for the social sciences to “perform” their objective, for anthropology to invent traditional peasants and then reinvent them so that they come to life on American campuses and in the rest of the world, so that the environment where they survive can be described as a mere extension of museums, where curious tourists discover the peasant's way of life. Social scientists who presented Africa and Asia as missionary fields for the West were infinitely more valuable and useful than anthropologists whose information about people and their actions were of little worth. Colonization is, above all, the making, from pieces of interviews, of cleverly sewn narratives for making a plausible, inevitable, morally and politically just reality, namely Western domination of the planet for the sake of reason and progress.

Establish new property rights, create new economic institutions, launch the construction of hydraulic projects, roads and railroads, remodel villages, concentrate the ownership of land, change crops and farming techniques... all these actions come under the same category of thought: modernization. They entail creating an enemy to be fought, hostile forces to overcome (superstition, tradition, culture, ignorance...). They all inevitably resort to violence. However violence, when it occurs day after day with the poor as victim, is hard to detect and analyze, not just because of the difficulty of obtaining evidence. In the fifth chapter, “Nobody listens to a poor man”, Mitchell has turned the usual arguments back on themselves. The problem is not to obtain testimonies, nor to verify the many accounts circulating about crime scenes. The crucial factor is the culture of fear; these accounts and testimonies are symptoms of this culture, which feeds on them. As much can be said about inquiries for verifying whether rumors are true. What is at stake is not the truth of what is said, but the part this saying has in constructing this culture of fear.

How to analyze this culture of fear? How to untangle its ties with violence? Mitchell has reviewed a few usual explanations. The first one is psychosociological: peasants expect and demand authority. They need and accept this authority, but this is merely an outer acceptance. Deep inside, they reject it. Violence is committed twice: first to make this split (outer submission but inner rebellion) and secondly to contain any resentment that happens to be expressed outwardly. For Mitchell, two other explanations are political. The one presents violence as the consequence of changes imposed from the outside. For example, since a reform of property rights affects their interests and way of life, the peasants revolt. The other explanation focuses on the local dimension of outbursts. It has to do with the coercive nature of the relations created between individuals belonging to the same village community or work group: "To be an individual in such a village economy means to be already situated in a set of coercive relations" (p. 172). For example, the difficulties of the labor movement might lead to sporadic, violent uprisings. These explanations see violence as part of a causal chain that, under certain conditions, leads to "violent" outbursts.

These explanations do not satisfy Mitchell. By focusing on attitudes and behaviors, they are unable to understand the culture of fear, which he deems essential for explaining the place of violence. The problem to be solved is mainly methodological. Associated with the culture of fear, violence entails silence, denial, the absence of tangible evidence. The notion of symbolic violence is useful for exposing this invisible part of the iceberg; but since it makes all explanations possible, it seems to amount to a form of intellectual laziness. Mitchell does not have the answer to this enigma, since whatever happens occurs in a silence where it is impossible to speak up. While rereading a study, based on interviews, of the political mobilization of peasants, Mitchell came to a standstill at the response of one interviewee who was asked to talk about the village's problems: "There are no problems," he said. "We just need a bakery", he added, "Not much grain these days in the village, and people baking at home are causing fires." "You think you can do something about it?" "No, I am a poor man and nobody listens to a poor man" (p. 177). Mitchell sees this impossible articulation as a possible origin of violence.

The culture of fear is expressed through silence, the refusal to respond or the ingrained inability to talk. To make people talk and, if they do not do so on their own, to free their tongues and release them from silence is a moral imperative shared by both well-intentioned policies and the social sciences when they are attentive to the humanity of their subject of study. Mitchell seems to think that we have moved beyond this point. What is important is not so much to free speech as to work on the mechanisms that force peo-

ple to remain silent. Expressing feelings is not necessarily talking. Obstinate silence turns out to be a positive form of expression and articulation instead of the antithesis of speech. Given this enigma, Mitchell has formulated a sentence that sounds more like an admission of powerlessness than a genuine program: "Those who live intolerable lives, coping with poverty, unemployment, hunger and other more direct forms of coercion, must somehow express their condition and yet may be unable to find the opportunity, the courage, or the language to do so" (p. 177). This peasant – presented as someone battling against modernity and forced to live in a climate of fear – is to fit into the imaginary community called a nation, to remain loyal to what the experts call the national heritage. This is the theme of the sixth chapter, "Heritage and violence". The building of nation-states is a classical subject of study for historians and political scientists. The nation, to adopt ANDERSON's well-known formula<sup>(5)</sup>, relies on techniques for making people imagine that they form a single community with others whom they do not know.

Mitchell has envisioned nation-building from two angles. The nation as an educational experience comes down to the idea of making people increasingly aware of the existence and reality of a collective actor. The latter emerges independently of any reference to, or encounter with, Otherness (*i.e.*, with others with whom one knows one's distance). The nation as a byproduct of nationalism implies a strong dose of autism. However the nation cannot exist without generating and regenerating meetings, encounters, shocks, that lead to the forming of an identity, a self, that sets it apart from others, from other nations. The nation takes form through opposition. Mitchell has chosen to study this twofold mechanism by following up on the attempts to reconstruct and rehabilitate a village caught up in the turmoil of the tourist trade

In 1945, the decision was made to move Gurna, a village near Luxor, so as to avoid interference with nearby archeological sites and their visitors. The peasants were accused of plundering the sites and harassing tourists. Hassan Fathy, the architect in charge of this project, seized an opportunity for restoring what he felt was the "vernacular" architectural tradition, which, in his opinion, had gradually been lost. This appeal to tradition was not at all backward-looking; it was made for the sake of progress. It sought to restore sanitary conditions, rational forms of energy consumption and a relatively autonomous food supply. Fathy encountered difficulties while trying to revive architectural techniques from bygone days. For instance, the beams needed to build the traditional vaulted granaries were hard to find nowadays. While

(5) Benedict ANDERSON, *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalisms*, London, Verso Editions 1983.



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In 1945, the decision was made to move Gurna, a village near Luxor. The peasants were accused of plundering archeological sites and harassing tourists. (Gurna in a 1950 photograph taken by Henri Cartier-Bresson).

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traveling in southern Egypt, Fathy discovered in the area of Nubia a technique using small mud bricks. He immediately transposed it to Gurna. However the peasants, who had been associated with plans for their new village, did not want this tradition. They preferred palm trees, which had several advantages. Fathy's failure was not that of "tradition". The technique in question turned out to be a recent innovation since the so-called Nubian village had come into existence but a few decades earlier!

This failure did not dissuade authorities from relaunching the project in 1998 in order, once again, to preserve the archeological heritage and ensure the well-being of peasants in comfort traditional housing – once again, the fight to protect the archeological heritage from plundering peasants. But this time, the resistance turned violent and ended in bloodshed. The "teachers" intent on learning to the "people" that they have a past that enriches their identity (traditional architecture) and that they must preserve (the archeological sites) were sent back to the classroom. The nation taught in school, the nationalistic nation, ended in a fiasco.

The other nation – the imaginary one, not the nation taught in school but the one at the center of a (theatrical) performance – was hardly any more successful. It is closely linked to tourism, this pageantry of Egypt for foreign visitors. In a few brilliant pages, Mitchell

has described how this full-fledged industry developed. American consultants (the offices of Arthur D. Little in 1982) worked out the strategy: form an enclave where tourists circulate without encountering the Egyptian population. Mitchell has finely analyzed this trade. It offers experiences for consumption, but brings nothing positive to Gurna and the village economy. The enclave is fully integrated in this foreign trade. In fact, a passport is needed to enter the touristic complexes, which have been designed to be self-sufficient. Local labor is strictly disciplined so that the tourists are not bothered. This trade seeks to fully identify contemporary Egypt with the land of the Pharaohs. As a peasant from Gurna ironically put it: "Tomorrow they will say these slippers I am wearing came from Ramses II" (p. 201)! One reason for keeping the local population of peasants, thieves and barbarians out of touristic sites has been the determination to put an end to trafficking in archeological objects. Mitchell has no trouble showing that this illicit trade, if it exists, is organized or even allowed by public authorities. The greatest irony in this situation is that these plans to separate the local population from the tourists run counter to the demands and desires expressed by the aging, wealthy American women who come to Egypt to find "part-time" husbands. In exchange for their financial help for small businesses, they satisfy their sexual needs a few





months per year. “Enframing” a situation always leads to “overflowing”.

The Egyptian nation defined by the sharing of common values and traditions (imaginary nationalism) and the one constructed through the organization of relations with others (the tourist trade) are complementary and closely interrelated. Gurna has been designed both as a reactivation of an imaginary past and as a sort of frontier post between Egyptian society and its presentation of itself to “others”. This performance, for internal and external use, is not without violence. The story told by Mitchell is proof. Paradoxically, the building of the Egyptian nation justifies excluding and disciplining the peasants. The results do not, in these conditions, come as a surprise. A petition signed in 1996 by the inhabitants of Gurna ends with this desperate remark: “We have begun to wonder whether we are Egyptians” (p. 207). Contrary to what those tempted by Manichaeism (whether Arthur D. Little or the opponents of globalization) might think, these peasants well knew that their interest was to live with the tourist trade: “We are married to the tourists” (p. 205), a statement that might, as I have just pointed out, sometimes be literally true! Mitchell has lucidly noted that no studies have been made on the water supply whereas several have been commissioned on the tourist trade.

## HOW EGYPT BECAME AN ECONOMY

The third part of the book, “Fixing the economy”, focuses on the mechanisms and arrangements that bring into being the economy as a thing that is hard to control and constantly risks coming undone. The Egyptian economy is a recent invention. The seventh chapter, “The object of development”, shows how international organizations finally managed to invent this improbable reality and impose measures for its development.

We hold a stereotype of Egypt, one repeated by specialists, as a narrow stretch of inhabitable land fertilized by the Nile overflowing its banks and depositing alluvium, where soaring population growth is making the situation worse. The following question states the equation defining the situation: how to see to it that a growing population survives on necessarily scarce resources? Since natural conditions restrict the available policy options, the decisions are to be made to solve as effectively as possible fully identified technical problems. This vision of Egypt underpins the power exercised by experts – by the three agencies based in Washington (the IMF, World Bank and United States Agency for International Development, USAID) that have monopolized “expertise”. Chapter seven presents the reforms advocated by these organizations during the 1970s and 1980s.

To expose the mechanisms whereby this expertise exercises a stranglehold over politics, Mitchell has focused on the formulation of problems, in particular the one raised, or rather imposed, by the World Bank: “Egypt has the largest population in the Middle East [...] Its 52 million people are crowded in the Nile delta and valley with a density higher than that of Bangladesh or Indonesia” (p. 212). Mitchell has delivered a brilliant critique of this text. After examining the idea of overpopulation and the comparisons with Bangladesh and Indonesia (and why not Belgium!), he has shown, by reviewing farming statistics, that agricultural output is increasing at the same pace as population growth. The actual problem has to do with distribution, since the policies adopted have worsened inequality. USAID has admitted this in the advice and criticism that experts voice among themselves: “Under these politics, losers necessarily outnumber winners” (p. 214).

Egypt is unable to ensure its basic food supply because the agricultural system has been so deeply transformed. The country started importing cereals, not to feed human beings but to fatten animals in order to satisfy the demand for meat from the wealthy classes in society. Peasants are to purchase their food, since they no longer produce it. All this has cultivated an astronomical national debt, which the United States canceled at the time of the war with Iraq in exchange for the government’s support.

The argument based on a lack of farmlands is no longer credible. Once again, the statistics are cruel. At issue are the distribution and redistribution of land, and the recognition of smallholders’ property rights. All things considered, the image of Egypt overwhelmed by nature – a narrow strip of overpopulated land – is a screen for masking the issues of inequality and of people deprived of power. It turns political questions into technical problems, thus preparing the soil for experts, who fill their role by prescribing treatments. The first therapy was to modernize the so-called “backward” agricultural sector. Excessive mechanization obviously worsened inequality, given the unequal solvency of peasants. The second treatment called for a free market and decentralization. The Egyptian government, deemed to be too interventionistic (since Nasser’s coup d’État in 1952), was urged to play a lesser role in the economy. This is a well-known program: the campaign to free farm prices and the privatization of health, social services and education. The effects are mechanical: the deepening indebtedness of the poorest and the economy’s growing dependence on the United States (especially for pharmaceuticals). Once again, the privilege of drawing the lessons from this deregulation is handed to USAID: “The better off, the more educated and expert officials benefit more than ordinary villages” (p. 228).

This depoliticization of the economy coincides with the transformation of Egypt into an object of deve-

lopment. Egypt, as a country, economy, nation and community has become an autonomous object of “thought” about its development. The nation-state is one outcome of the factors and methods that organize social practices and turn them into mental representations: language, highways, television, cadastral maps, the literature on tourism, the studies devoted to countries in the South, the statistics produced by international organizations, and so forth. This objectivation of Egypt as a nation and an economy to be developed has two consequences. First of all, it makes it easy to simplify by focusing on, for example, trade policy instead of the complicated, differentiated networks of interdependence. Secondly, national and international centers of “expertise” analyze, advise and evaluate while placing themselves outside the object they describe even though they intervene and perform actions on it: “An organization like USAID, which must imagine itself as a rational consciousness standing outside the country, is in fact a central element in configurations of power within the country” (p. 233). The USAID program’s main objective was to reinforce and develop the private sector. Its interventions strengthened the state’s hold, quite simply because its contacts – the levers that USAID proposed using – were within the state: “USAID could not diagnose itself as an integral aspect of the problem” (p. 234). For Mitchell, the problem is not so much the accuracy of the reports and advice coming from international organizations as the latter’s inability to imagine their role as well as the effects and limits of their interventions. In the language of the social sciences, we might call this a deficit of reflexivity.

This interpretation is still too kind; for Mitchell has gone on to show that international organizations are, in fact, helping to increase the economic and political hold of the United States. The appeal to free enterprise conceals the system of financial aid and its effects. The analysis of financial circuits leads to impressive conclusions. By asking the Egyptian state to reduce its interventionism, international organizations are used as the secular arm of the American government, which is thus reinforced. Aid serves to create a solvable demand for the products and services proposed by American firms, orders for military equipment being of crucial importance. As Mitchell points out, Egypt is part of the American government’s farm policy. By forbidding subsidies for Egyptian farmers, transnational organizations open the market for American multinationals, which, as we know, enjoy considerable subsidies in the United States. In fact, 58% of US economic assistance is spent in the United States on something other than development projects, while the remainder goes to the American firms involved in these projects. Of course, the population benefits from these purchased goods and from these projects, but the effects are a cause of concern since the

Egyptian economy’s dependence augments along with its debt.

This analysis opens perspectives for looking beyond Egypt. The function of the neoliberal doctrine might well be to weaken nation-states, save the United States of America. Expertise, especially in the social sciences, and the “technicization” of the problems of development are cornerstones in this overbearing arrangement.

The development policies advocated by international (in fact, US) organizations call for a free market. The eighth chapter, “The market’s place”, starts by asking what it means to establish a free market. Answering this question necessitates studies conducted in the field. Before turning to fieldwork, Mitchell examines the hypotheses entailed by the question. When a speaker talks about “the” market (in the singular), he believes in the existence of a perfectly defined reality that, called a market (or capitalism), has its own logic for ensuring its reproduction and even its growth. Many definitions have been proposed: self-interest, profit-seeking, the law of supply and demand for setting prices, the circulation of information, the accumulation and reinvestment of capital, the division of capital and labor, and the historic process of worldwide expansion. Those who defend and who oppose capitalism both share the hypothesis of a self-contained market.

The hypothesis of a borderline separating the market from the nonmarket sphere (a hypothesis that tends to present the state as the warranty of the free market) is, as Mitchell has emphasized, the point where an immense work of compartmentalization is undertaken – work performed by, in particular, the various social sciences when they turn toward the economy. Furthermore, institutions are set up to oversee this compartmentalization. As Mitchell’s subsequent studies have shown, colonization and especially decolonization (with nation-states in place of the former colonies) have played a key role in concretizing national economies and the economy-as-a-thing, in making them into manipulable, governable objects with their own logic. These objects are contemporary creations. Keynes, often said to be the father of the welfare state, contributed powerfully to the objectivation of the economy-as-a-thing – through the long controversy about India’s financial autonomy and then through his macroeconomic models backed up with national statistics. The market and welfare state are two sides of the same coin.

After having helped formed the economy-as-a-thing, the social sciences hastened to qualify their handling of the “noneconomy”. This is where the history of economic sociology, heterodox economics and economic anthropology begins. Mitchell is content with pointing out two strategies for analyzing the relations between the market and nonmarket spheres and for imposing the idea of a separation between the two. The first one is well known: embeddedness, whereby calculations do

WHILE READING



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Mitchell has shown that international organizations are, in fact, helping to increase the economic and political hold of the United States.

not stop at the bounds of the market. For example, peasants, when involved in practices outside the market, are described as, in fact, constantly interacting with the market. The second strategy hinges on alternative economies. Here, the point of contention is not the existence of markets but their universality. The Western market organization cannot be applied as a solution everywhere, since contact with other realities alters it, whence the emergence of other forms of economy, of other economies. In both these cases, as Mitchell has indicated, the idea remains intact that a model of the market (or of a reality taken to be the market) exists. Embeddedness merely complicates relations between the market and what lies outside it. The thesis of the existence of alternative economies only discusses the conditions for its own extension.

Mitchell has used case studies to show that we must abandon the idea of the existence of the market (or of capitalism) if we want to describe what is happening in the Egyptian countryside. The example of tractors sheds light on the interrelations between various practices that we cannot analyze as the juncture of different forms of production – what used to be called the articulation of modes of production. In particular, the subsistence sector does not underlie the market economy. The exact opposite is true: “Market crops, protected and promoted by the state, survived in support of self-provisioning” (p. 255). For a lesser, a mightier parasite! The study of price-fixing lends support to this thesis: there is no price that is not regulated, that is not tied to a monopolistic position. Likewise, there is no sector of the economy that is not subsidized. Reforms in favor of the free market merely increase these interrelations and reinforce the subsistence sector. Even officials recognize the collateral damage, but this does not keep them from staying the course or using force, if need be. As a peasant told Mitchell, “They put us in the mill and turn it and turn it” (p. 265). Being ground in the mill does not increase the autonomy of the market but, on the contrary, does multiply the interrelations between the various forms of activities now said to be economic. Interested in the role played by experts, especially by social scientists, Mitchell has noticed that this campaign of reforms did not rely on case studies of conducted in villages. Ultimately, experts are convinced, like their critics, that we know everything about the market and nonmarket spheres and, therefore, know what measures to take: “The power of what we call capitalism rests increasingly on its ability to portray itself as a unique and universal form [...] The displacements and reformulations of the capitalist project show its dependence on arrangements and forces that this logic needs to portray as noncapitalist” (p. 271). Everyone who talks about capitalism or the market, whether by extolling or stigmatizing them, is helping them exist as an objectified reality. How to understand this market, which everyone believes they know so well?

In the ninth chapter, “Dreamland”, Mitchell cites practical examples to analyze not the Egyptian economy but the set of mechanisms and arrangements that bring into existence what is called the (formal) market economy, a dreamland and enclave of modernity. It is created by following IMF recommendations: devaluation of the national currency, the demarcation of two separate spaces for the circulation of money (one for the dollar, the other for the Egyptian pound), the reduction of the money supply and the abolition of subsidies for the public sector. This policy is recommended for all national economies. The IMF is satisfied with its pupil. It does not matter to it that the effects on the population were unmistakably negative: you have to suffer at first to gain the right to be happy later on. Mitchell has described these effects by drawing on scarce, incomplete sources of information, which he has tracked down in the notes of reports. Economics as a discipline, and economists as experts are important in this story.

What the IMF describes as the privatization of the public sector leads to the formation of networks that, both public and private, bring government and business into a close relationship. A few solidly established families control these networks<sup>(6)</sup>. Mitchell has shown, in particular, how a banking sector that speculates against the Egyptian currency eliminated, with massive support from the state, the active and efficient “Islamic investment companies”: “The reform program did not remove the state from the market or eliminate profligate public subsidies. Its main impact was to concentrate public funds into different hands, and many fewer” (p. 282). These family groups, whose history Mitchell has recounted, share the following characteristics. They are nurtured by public contracts and receive support from USAID. Since they include private banks, which fund their operations, they very seldom resort to financial markets. They have very few employees. They specialize in supplying goods and services to a tiny fraction of the population: 3% consume 50% of the wealth.

Reforms, a substitute for an economic policy, help create a space that exists as such and can be described as economic. Statistics objectify this space and only concern it, since all else lies outside the statistician’s grasp. This “all else” is what we call the “informal” sector. Although it cannot be measured, it is far from negligible. For example, the importation of cannabis resin during the 1980s amounted to between two and four billion US dollars, an attractive figure far above the value of all other Egyptian imports (not counting petroleum). Furthermore, a fifth of government expenditures goes to the military; they are not de-

(6) They are identical to what David STARK (“Recombinant property in East European capitalism”, *American journal of sociology*, 101, 1996, pp. 993-1027) has so clearly described in the countries of eastern Europe during the transition toward the market economy.

scribed, and no figures are given, in reports or statistics. “The problems of informal, clandestine and unreported economic activities are so great that these alone would provide sufficient reason to question the idea that the economy is an object that can be mapped and measured” (p. 289). The pair of concepts “enframing” and “overflowing” serve to describe and analyze the relations between the market and so-called nonmarket sectors.

Mitchell has tried to identify and analyze the enframing of the Egyptian “market economy”. He has concentrated on three arrangements: property rights (the second chapter having presented their origins and effects), the family institution and multinational corporations. As shown by an analysis of the industrial groups busiest in the formation of this “economic” enclave, the family and household are factors that shape economic activities and limit “overflowing” but without ever fully stopping it. After all, families are divided and pitted against each other, as bonds of matrimony and ties of affection suddenly come apart. Big multinational corporations play a powerful part in this “enframing” process. By making nonmarket arrangements, they make it possible for the market to exist. We are familiar with Simon’s striking metaphor for this anomaly: were we to color market relations in green and hierarchies in red, the Earth, seen from Mars, would be bright red. Mitchell’s original analysis of the part played by big firms in this reframing process emphasizes that economic theory has always (and not just since Ronald Coase) shown an interest in this usual existence of organizations and hierarchies at the very core of markets. Mitchell recalls that Marx in Volume III of *Capital* already raised this problem.

Noting that big corporations evidently preceded the installation of capitalism, Mitchell’s argument runs counter to every supposition made by theorists of the market economy. Hierarchical organizations are not a consequence of capitalism, as the theory of transaction costs claims in veiled terms. For Mitchell, the opposite is true: capitalism, as Braudel rightly saw, is a consequence of the existence of the big companies born in the 17th century. According to Mitchell, the market, as described by Adam Smith, was conceived as a countervailing power to these big companies, which, like the Indies companies, had formed economic and political empires, and even held a monopoly over the founding of colonies. As Mitchell has shown elsewhere, these companies, which the market was supposed to contain, probably served as a model for the United States – we need but recall that the American flag with its stars and stripes is an exact copy of the East India Company’s flag. The modern state, which intervenes in the economy to enable it to exist and develop, and the liberal market are machines originally designed to fight against the omnipotence of big companies.

Since then, we live in a world with a balance of power between three sets of players: the state, the market and multinationals. The hard task of managing this balance explains why the development of economics as the science of markets is closely related to the formation of a body of knowledge about organizations (law, accountancy, marketing, etc.) and about the instruments and techniques to be used by the state (econometrics, statistics, macro-economics). From its origins, the (capitalistic) market has been a piece in a complex puzzle of interdependent and countervailing powers. Were this balance to come undone, the market would fall under the hierarchical arrangements proposed by family networks or powerful corporations, or else become dependent on government.

Focusing on but one of these three players – the free market – leads not only to bracketing the other elements in this system, without which it would not exist, but also (and especially) to transforming the effects of this enframing process into substantial realities. By only showing an interest in the planet’s dreamlands, by forgetting the forces that demarcate these enclaves, economic theory trivializes violence, considering it to be a secondary activity. It obstinately tries to turn anything that does not enter into the framework into a residual reality. Violence, “overflowing” and nonmarket institutions are not on the periphery of the markets but at their center.

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## DOMINATION

Hopefully, this review has convinced readers of the radical originality of *Rule of experts*. Mitchell has, with consummate skill, eluded all the traps awaiting anyone who shows an interest in developing countries. He has dodged the easy solution of pointing a blaming finger, but he has made us feel what has to be called, for want of a better phrase, relations of domination. His light style – constantly tinged with a sense of humor and a feeling of empathy for those who, though unable to make their voices heard, have something to express – adds force to his argumentation and demonstration.

Postcolonial situations are irreplaceable laboratories for whoever wants to understand the forces at work in globalization. They are, too, tough subjects to study, imperiling any theoretical analysis by placing it in jeopardy of reductionistic simplifications. Mitchell’s exploit is to have tackled this incipient subject without turning his theoretical and methodological tools into an eyesore for readers. The theory is embedded in the telling. Thanks to clever shifts in time and space, the reader is plunged *in medias res* into this complicated story.

Mitchell has shown the value of the multisite studies now advocated by anthropologists. He has thus shed

light on several forces and the changing patterns they form. A story in a network: a history of shifts, leaps and rapprochements; a history that abolishes borders (between micro and macro; between economy and politics, or even between nation and globalization) while trying to show how these borders have been drawn, questioned, shifted; a history that, as a consequence, lets us see the role played by mosquitoes and parasites, by ammonium nitrate, by private property and by American women begging for and then buying the favors of the natives; a history of hydraulic projects and international organizations, of cadastral maps and family ties; a history immersed in the deafening silence of a voiceless, concealed violence, which the social sciences normally have difficulty bringing to light and analyzing.

As its title indicates, this book deals with the role of “expertise”, in particular by the social sciences, in the making of what is called society, economy, nation, globalization or even tradition. Michel Foucault, in *Discipline and punish* and then in his writings on the birth of biopolitics, was among the first to draw attention to the performative nature of the social sciences. Mitchell has pursued this exploration. His knowledge of the anthropology of science and techniques and of the very new anthropology of markets, along with his control of theories about state-building, have enabled him to accurately and convincingly describe the contribution of the social sciences to postcolonial studies. This book, along with a few others being released, harbingers a new era for the social sciences. The latter can no longer remain outside the subject being studied or, worse yet, take sides and become *engagé*.

But how to proceed so as to produce analyses that are not locked in the labyrinth of reflexivity? How to cope with the enormous problems of writing that arise for authors who refuse the stance of a scientist (keeping the subject of study at a distance) but also refuse to wave a censorious finger? It is not the least of the qualities of Mitchell’s book to have shown that this challenge can be taken up in an elegant and convincing manner without yielding to the obscurities of reflexivity.

The author is present everywhere, not as a guide or witness nor, worse yet, as a character who throws his subjectivity in the reader’s face. Since the “social-in-construction” (in other words, the very subject of the social sciences) is made for the most part by colleagues, social scientists, engineers and scientists of all disciplines, we need but follow their work to reach our objective. It is not beyond reach; for we are part of the establishment! By following the social sciences and, too, the natural and biological sciences, Mitchell has taken us to the core of the building of the Egyptian nation, to the strategies for bringing a free market into being and for relating the modern economy to the ancient glory of the Pharaohs. Who other than a political scientist trained in the hard school of history, economics and anthropology, and specialized in Arabic grammar, could have done as much? The “social scientists” are starting to pay their debt by showing us that we are unable to understand the world surrounding us if we do not take into account the role they have played – and still play – in formulating it and making it intelligible. ■