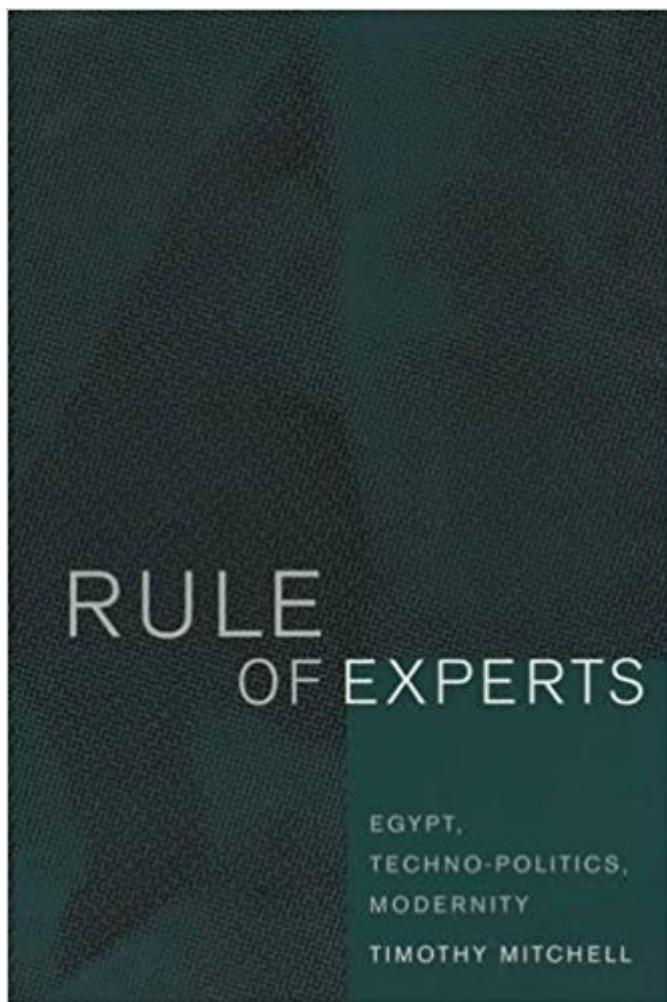


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# Rule Of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, Modernity



## **Synopsis**

Can one explain the power of global capitalism without attributing to capital a logic and coherence it does not have? Can one account for the powers of techno-science in terms that do not merely reproduce its own understanding of the world? *Rule of Experts* examines these questions through a series of interrelated essays focused on Egypt in the twentieth century. These explore the way malaria, sugar cane, war, and nationalism interacted to produce the techno-politics of the modern Egyptian state; the forms of debt, discipline, and violence that founded the institution of private property; the methods of measurement, circulation, and exchange that produced the novel idea of a national "economy," yet made its accurate representation impossible; the stereotypes and plagiarisms that created the scholarly image of the Egyptian peasant; and the interaction of social logics, horticultural imperatives, powers of desire, and political forces that turned programs of economic reform in unanticipated directions. Mitchell is a widely known political theorist and one of the most innovative writers on the Middle East. He provides a rich examination of the forms of reason, power, and expertise that characterize contemporary politics. Together, these intellectually provocative essays will challenge a broad spectrum of readers to think harder, more critically, and more politically about history, power, and theory.

## **Book Information**

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## **Customer Reviews**

Timothy Mitchell, Professor, Department of Middle East and Asian Studies, Columbia University, is the author of *Colonising Egypt* (California, 1991, with a new preface), and editor of *Questions of Modernity* (2000).

What a great book. It will change the way you think about experts, the 'economy', capitalism, modernity and more. If you are at all interested in history and theory of space, society, governance, post-Marxist political economy, expertise, colonialism or North Africa .. I highly recommend it.

The work of Mitchell is impressive. The book is critically looking at the making of today's Egypt and deconstructing completely the myths that are attached to the Arab Republic. The anti-mosquito campaign, the Asswan dam, overpopulation and land ownership systems are few of the topics tackled and looked at in depth by the researcher. This is an amazing insight in the mechanisms that made Egypt as it is today, and the involvement of the West (US and Europe) in the form of 'technical help' or development aid (US AID) that Mitchell is not afraid of calling interference. A great book!

In many respects, Timothy Mitchell's *Rule of Experts* appears to be a cautionary tale of unintended consequences for modern policy makers and economists of the western world, as these experts work to decipher market relationships and implement market policies in non-western nations. But Mitchell's book, with its message seemingly so obvious, goes much deeper as it challenges the very framework historians use when examining non-western cultures. Mitchell does this by bringing into question the creation of the nation-state of Egypt and by tracing the genealogy of how "the economy" came to arrive at its present meaning. He also studies the term capitalism, arguing that it is not as definitive as is assumed in western culture. To examine how these ideas build a framework to help the reader understand their importance in studying poverty, Mitchell uses several themes, three of which will be examined here: first, terms that represent accepted ideas often conceal more than they reveal; second, capital can develop characteristics that allow it to function as both human and nonhuman; and third, property equals power, thus no property equals no power. First, Mitchell spends a great deal of time tracing the history of the transformation of the term "economy" to "the economy." While this may not seem to be directly related to a discourse on poverty, Mitchell explains for the reader how economy, until the twentieth century, referred to a husbanding of resources or a "proper governing" of the community's affairs" (pp. 81-82), even when used in relation to a nation-state. It was only through colonialism that the transformation from "economy" to "the economy" was made, and it is the colonized nation of Egypt that Mitchell examines. Here, Mitchell shows how another accepted western idea - that of the nation-state - created great wealth for some in Egypt, while creating or increasing the poverty of others. His argument is well

researched, and traces how the European estate along with the production of cotton and sugar cane as cash crops led to property disputes and eventually to land seizures. This, tied to the creation of the Aswan Dam's shrinking the area of arable land, impoverished the "peasant" class to subsistent levels. This study of "the economy" allowed the experts to distance themselves from their object of study (Egypt), and in so doing, allowed them to conceal both their own role within the economic structure, and their failure to address the underlying issue causing the growing poverty of the "peasant" class. The economy, the nation-state, and even the peasant, Mitchell argues, should not be accepted as given; to understand the use of these terms and their impact, their genealogy and current meanings must be questioned. Second, Mitchell examines Marxist ideas on capital as both a human and nonhuman entity; after examining this theory in chapter one, Mitchell alludes to this theme periodically throughout the book. In chapter one, he uses a particular example, Ahmud 'Abbud, to show how this personification of capital is possible. After obtaining capital, 'Abbud became an agent of his capital in several instances (most of these involved his efforts to obtain government contracts for various projects, with the most notable involved with the Aswan Dam) as he sought new ways to increase his wealth. With this clear example eloquently portrayed for the reader, Mitchell's use of this theme returns in his sections, Peasant Studies and Fixing the Economy, as he examines first Fathy and his village at Gurna. While Mitchell is writing about Fathy to illustrate the larger issue of the making of a nation by establishing an Egyptian past that has remained unchanged for six thousand years, he nonetheless alludes to the personification of capital as Fathy received his contract to build his village for the peasants, because he came from a well-to-do family of architects that sought out government-funded projects. Only the wealthy and the government could afford the architectural services of Fathy; therefore, Fathy had to represent his capital as he (or his family) sought out these well-paying contracts. This same theme returns again as Mitchell examines the expertise provided by western entities (mainly the U.S.) as government agencies such as USAID, in order to provide a future market for U.S. wheat, provided detailed analyses describing why Egypt needed to import U.S. wheat. This expertise, while supplied on the pretext of modernizing Egypt, served the largest owners/producers of the wheat they recommended that Egypt buy. Last, Mitchell illustrates repeatedly the idea that property equals power, and therefore no property equals no power. Again, much of the groundwork for this theme is laid in chapter one as Mitchell examines the history of Egypt, beginning with the malarial epidemics of the 1940s, the dam built at Aswan, and the property policies that allowed Egyptians such as Ahmud 'Abbud to accumulate large tracts of land for growing sugar cane. While 'Abbud was increasing his land holdings, he was increasing his power. By the same token, many of the "peasants" that had to

give up land for 'Abbud, and others like him, were becoming landless. This, in turn, made them more powerless than before, because now they had to become day wage earners, and very often they did not earn enough to live on a daily basis. This lead to indebtedness, and a form of indentured serfdom. This theme returns again in Peasant Studies, as Mitchell writes his chapter entitled, "Nobody Listens to a Poor Man." The title alone speaks to the theme; Mitchell's examination of the central power of the state, or rather, the constructs assuming central power of the state, is apropos, because the power is not in the fields of the laborers. This theme is also present in the third section of the book, as Mitchell examines the fixing of the Egyptian economy. Again, the peasant is powerless and has no voice (with one notable exception: the bread riots) as the central government of Egypt complies with demands made by the International Monetary Fund, even though these demands have the intended consequence of making the poor poorer, at least in the short term. To understand Rule of Experts in relation to poverty, the reader must examine some basic themes: first, terms that represent accepted ideas often conceal more than they reveal; second, capital can develop characteristics that allow it to function as both human and nonhuman; and third, property equals power, thus no property equals no power. It is with these three themes that Mitchell creates a coherent body of essays, serving the overarching idea of challenging the basic constructs western historians use when examining non-western cultures. He shows the reader why it is necessary to question basic assumptions that social scientists, economists, and policy makers ascribe to if they are used out of context.

It's clear the author has an amazing grasp of Egyptian history, and it's a joy to read about issues and events affecting the poor and disenfranchised that are rarely explored. At the same time, this is not easy reading. It's very dense and complicated - I think you'd need a PhD in cultural theory and semiotics and another in Middle East history to fully understand everything, which makes it very hard to put down in the middle of an essay and pick up a day or two later. As a reader who likes to sneak in a few minutes here and there throughout the day, I've found it a big challenge to set aside the hour or so of careful reading that each essay demands. If you're the type of person who can, I think you'll find the book rewarding. Unfortunately, the author's admirable effort is marred by a simply bad Kindle edition. Footnotes are not linked, making it very difficult to hop to the back to look up a source. You cannot change the font from what I found to be a very unpleasant one. And chapters are not marked; as far as the Kindle is concerned the whole book is one big chapter. On the plus side, at least the illustrations have been converted legibly.

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