

Bookshelf: “Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, Modernity” by Timothy Mitchell

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Bookshelf, Series

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Tim Mitchell’s *Rule of Experts* has remained with me a long time, and continues to be an inspiration for my work and thinking. Focused on twentieth-century Egypt, Mitchell raises foundational questions about the purported globality of themes such as capitalism, technology, politics, ecology, and power. In doing so, the book opens up a range of discussions that are both theoretically rich and empirically grounded. As such, I believe *Rule of Experts* has much to offer to environmental history, as well as other fields.

Two arguments stand out for me. Firstly, Mitchell succinctly demonstrates that “universal” categories of social theory—such as the economy or capitalism, or even ecology—are really *products* of locally contingent networks, practices, and institutions of power. He cautions against their frequent—but inadequate—use as *a priori* global frameworks that precede historical experience. Such a move obscures and flattens the variations, processes, and patterns that make up these categories in the first place. Secondly, Mitchell shows that the notion of human calculability and control—indeed of techno-scientific “rationality”—that drives much of our story of modernity is simplistic and misleading. He uses wars, epidemics, and agrarian “fiascos” to illustrate the limits to human “reason” and to the universal “benefit” that our high-modernist agendas purport to advance. A chapter beguilingly titled “Can the Mosquito Speak?” is especially resonant in this regard. For me, *Rule of Experts* is a timely reminder that catch-all concepts such as progress, development, growth, and modernity need critical re-evaluation in light of their impact and consequences on the ground.

At the RCC, I continue to think through these issues while working on my book on the socio-environmental history of tea in colonial eastern India. As a prized cash crop,

tea's success came to be read as Britain's botanical mastery of the subcontinent's natural world—the civilizing of an otherwise “wild” and “unrefined” plant. Reality, of course, was far messier. For instance, tea's monoculture ecosystem proved to be a thriving base for a litany of pests, which in turn dramatically reduced crop quality and profits. Ideologically speaking, these bugs reminded planters that the rhetoric of scientific triumphalism that accompanied tea's “discovery” was premature and unfounded. The battle against pests continues to this day. The human impact of the tea enterprise was even more damning. Large-scale plantation works (especially irrigation channels) spawned the *Anopheles* beyond control. By 1896, the labor mortality rate due to malaria alone had exceeded 33.6 percent. Similarly, deforestation for tea clearings—and to meet the needs of commerce—effectively undid concurrent efforts at forest conservation.

Overall, my book is an attempt to highlight some of these interlinked conundrums, logics, and consequences of empire's gardens and its famed product. *Rule of Experts* is an inspiring theoretical base for this exposition.