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THEORY TALK #59

TIMOTHY MITCHELL ON INFRA-THEORY, THE STATE EFFECT, AND THE TECHNOPOLITICS OF OIL

Theory Talks

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TIMOTHY MITCHELL ON INFRA-THEORY, THE STATE EFFECT, AND THE TECHNOPOLITICS OF OIL

This is the first in a series of Talks dedicated to the technopolitics of International Relations, linked to the forthcoming double volume 'International Relations and the Global Politics of Science and Technology' edited by Maximilian Mayer, Mariana Carpes, and Ruth Knoblich



The unrest in the Arab world put the region firmly in the spotlights of IR. Where many scholars focus on the conflicts in relation to democratization as a local or regional dynamic, political events there do not stand in isolation from broader international relations or other—for instance economic—concerns. Among the scholars who has insisted on such broader linkages and associations that co-constitute political dynamics in the region, Timothy Mitchell stands out. The work of

Mitchell has largely focused on highly specific aspects of politics and development in Egypt and the broader Middle East, such as the relations between the building of the Aswan Dam and redistribution of expertise, and the way in which the differences between coal and oil condition democratic politics. His consistently nuanced and enticing analyses have gained him a wide readership, and Mitchell's analyses powerfully resonate across qualitative politically oriented social sciences. In this *Talk*, Timothy Mitchell discusses, amongst others, the birth of 'the economy' as a powerful modern political phenomenon, how we can understand the state as an effect rather than an actor, and the importance of taking technicalities seriously to understand the politics of oil.

What is, according to you, the biggest challenge / principal debate in current globally oriented studies? What is your position or answer to this challenge / in this debate?

I'm not myself interested in, or good at, big debates, the kinds of debates that define and drive forward an academic field. The reason for that is partly that once a topic has become a debate, it has tended to have sort of hardened into a field, in which there are two or three positions, and as a scholar you have to take one of those positions. In the days when I was first trained in Political Science and studied International Relations, that was so much my sense of the field and indeed of the whole discipline of political science. This is part of one's initially training in any field: it is laid out as a serious debate. I found this something I just could not deal with; I did not find it

intellectually interesting which I think sort of stayed with me all the way through to where I am now. So although big debates are important for a certain defining and sustaining of academic fields and training new generations of students, it is not the kind of way in which I myself have tended to work. I have tended to work by moving away from what the big debates have been in a particular moment. My academic interests always started when I found something curious that interests me and that I try to begin to see in a different way.

However, I suppose with my most recent book *Carbon Democracy* (2011), in a sense there *was* a big debate going on, which was the debate about the resource curse and oil democracy. That was an old debate going back to the 70's, but had been reinvigorated by the Iraq war in 2003. But that to me is an example of the problem with big debates, because the terms in which that debate was argued back and forth—and is still argued—did not seem to make sense as a way to understand the role of energy in 20th century democratic politics. Was oil good for democracy or bad for democracy? The existing debate began with those as two different things—as a dependent or independent variable—so you would already determine things in advance that I would have wanted to open up. In general I'm not a good person for figuring out what the big debates are.

But I think, moving from International Relations as a field to 'globally oriented studies', to use your phrase, one of the biggest challenges—just on an academic level, leaving aside challenges that we face as a global community—is to learn to develop ways of seeing even what seem like the most global and most international issues, as things that are very local. Part of the problem with fields such as 'global studies', the term 'globalization', and other terms of that sort, is that they tend to define their objects of study in opposition to the local, in opposition to even national-level modes of analysis. By consequence, they assume that the actors or the forces that they're going to study must themselves be in some sense global, because that is the premise of the field. So whether it is nation states acting as world powers; whether it is capitalism understood as a global system—they have to exist on this plane of the global, on some sort of universal level, to be topics of IR and global studies. And yet, on close inspection, most of the concerns or actors central to those modes of inquiry tend to operate on quite local levels; they tend to be made up of very small agents, very particular arrangements that somehow have managed to put themselves together in ways that allow them take on this appearance and sometimes this effectiveness of things that are global. I'm very interested in taking things apart that are local, on a particular level, to understand what it is that enables such small things, such local and particular agents, to act in a way that creates the appearance of the global or the international world.

Now this relates back to the second part of your question, about substantive concerns that we face as a global community. When I was writing *Carbon Democracy* there was all this attention on the problem of 'creating a more democratic Middle East', as it was understood at the time of the Iraq war. It struck me that when debating this problem—of oil and democracy, of energy and democracy—we saw it as somehow specific to these countries and to the part of the world where many countries were very large-scale energy producers. We were not thinking about the fact that we are all in a sense caught up in this problem that I call carbon democracy, and that there are issues—whether it is in terms of the increasing difficulty of extracting energy from the earth, or the consequences of having extracted the carbon and put it up in the atmosphere—that we, as democracies, are very, very challenged by. Those issues—and I think in particular the concerns around climate change—when you look at them from the perspective of U.S. politics, and the inability of the U.S. even to take the relatively minor steps that other industrialized democracies have taken: this inaction suggests a larger problem of oil and democracy that needs explaining and understanding and working on and organizing about. I also think there is a whole range of contemporary issues related to energy production and consumption that revolve around the building of more egalitarian and more socially just worlds. And, again, those issues present

themselves very powerfully as concerns in American politics, but are experienced in other ways in other parts of the world. I would not single out any one of them as more urgent or important than another, and I do think we still have a long struggle ahead of us here.

How did you arrive at where you currently are in your approach to issues?

Well, I had a strange training as a scholar because I kept shifting fields. I actually began as a student of law and then moved into history while I was still an undergraduate, but then became interested in political theory; decided that I liked it better than political science. But by the time I arrived in political science to study for a PhD, I had become interested in politics of the Middle East. This was partly from just travelling there when I was a student growing up in England, but I also suppose in some ways the events of the seventies had really drawn attention to the region. So the first important thing that shaped me was this constant shifting of fields and disciplines, which was not to me a problem—it was rather that there was a kind of intellectual curiosity that drove me from academic field to field. And so if there was one thing that helped me arrive at where I am, it was this constant moving outside of the boundaries of one discipline and trespassing on the next one—trying to do it for long enough that they started to accept me as someone who they could debate with. And I think all along that has been important to the kind of scholarship I do; yet therefore I would say where I currently am in my thinking about my field is difficult in itself to define. But I think it is probably defined by the sense that there are many, many fields—and it is moving across them and trying to do justice to the scholarship in them, but at the same time trying to connect insights from one field with what one can do in another field. I have always tried to draw things together in that sense, a sense that one can call an interdisciplinary or post-disciplinary sensitivity.

I think the other part of what has shaped me intellectually was that, in ways I explained before, I was always drawn into the local and the particular and the specific and I was never very good at thinking at that certain level of large-scale grand theory. So having found myself in the field of Middle Eastern politics in a PhD-program, and being told that it involves studying Arabic which I was very glad to do, I then went off to spend summers in the Arab world, and later over more extended periods of time for field research. But to me, Egypt and other places I've worked—but principally Egypt—became not just a field site, but a place where I have now been going for more than 30 years and where I have developed very close ties and intellectual relationships, friendships, that I think have constantly shaped and reshaped my thinking. And even when I am reading about things that are not specifically related to Egypt—the work I do on the history of economics, or the work I have done on oil politics that are not directly connected with my research on Egypt—I am often thinking in relation to places and people and communities there that have profoundly shaped me as a scholar.

So traveling across different contexts I'd say I have not developed a kind of set of theoretical lenses I take with me. Rather, I would say I have developed a way of seeing—I would not necessarily call it 'meta', I see it as much more as sort of 'infra': much more mundane and everyday. While I have this sort of intellectual history of moving across disciplines and social sciences in an academic way, there is another sort of moving across fields, another sensibility, and that sensibility provides me with a sense of rootedness or grounding. And that is a more traditional way of moving across fields, because whether when one is writing about contemporary politics or more historically about politics, one is dealing constantly with areas of technical concern of one sort or another, with specialist knowledge. Engaging with that expert knowledge has always provided both a political grounding in specific concerns and with a kind of concern with local, real-world, struggles on the ground. So that might have been things like the transformation of irrigation in nineteenth-century Egypt, or the remaking of the system of law; or

it might be the history of malaria epidemics in the twentieth century, or the relationship between those epidemics and transformations taking place in the crops that were grown; or, more recently—and more obviously—of oil and the history of energy, and the way different forms of energy are brought out of the ground. And I should mention beside those areas of technical expertise already listed, economics as well: a discipline I was never trained in, but that I realized I had to understand if I was to make sense of contemporary Egyptian politics—just as much as I had to understand agricultural hydraulics or something of the petroleum geology as a form of technical expertise that is shaping the common world.

In sum, what keeps me grounded is the idea that to really make sense of the politics of any of those fields, one has got to do one's best to sort of enter and explore the more technical level—with the closest attention that one can muster to the technical and the material dimensions of what is involved—whether it is in agricultural irrigation, building dams or combating disease. And entering this level of issues does not only mean interviewing experts but arriving at the level of understanding the disease, the parasite, the modes of its movement, the hydraulics of the river, the properties of different kinds of oil... So as you can see it is not really 'meta', it really is 'infra' in the anthropological way of staying close to the ground, staying close to processes and things and materials.

What would a student need to become a specialist in IR or understand the world in a global way?

A couple of things. I think one is precisely the thing I just mentioned in answer to your last question: that is, the kind of interest in going inside technical processes, learning about material objects, not being afraid of taking up an investigation of something that is a body of knowledge totally outside one's area of training and expertise. So, if I was advising someone or looking for a student, I would not say there is a particular skill or expertise, but rather a willingness to really get one's hands dirty with the messy technical details of an area—and that can be an area of specialist knowledge such as economics, but also technical and physical processes of, for instance, mineral extraction. I think to me this is—for the kind of work I am interested in doing—enormously important.

The other thing that I would stress in the area of globally-oriented studies, is that one could think of two ways of approaching a field of study. One is to move around the world and gather together information, often with a notion of improving things, such as development work, human rights work, international security work. This entails gathering from one's own research and from other experts in the field, with a certain notion of best practices and the state of field, and of what works, and therefore what can then be moved from one place to another as a form of expert knowledge. Some people really want that mobile knowledge, which I suppose is often associated with the ability to generalize from a particular case and to establish more universal principles about whatever the topic is. And in this case one's own expertise becomes the carrying or transmission of that expert knowledge. One saw a lot of that around the whole issue of democratization that I mentioned before in the Middle East, around the Iraq war when experts were brought in. They had done democracy elsewhere in the world and then they turned up to do it in Iraq, and again following the Arab Spring.

Against that, to me, there is another mode of learning, which is not to learn *about* what is happening but to learn *from*. So to give the example, if there is an uprising and a struggle for democracy going on in the streets of Cairo, one could try and learn about that and then make it

fit one's models and classify it within a broader range of series of democratizations across the world, or one could try and learn from it, and say 'how do we rethink what the possibilities of democracy might be on the basis of what is happening?' To me those are two distinct modes of work. They are not completely mutually exclusive, but I think people are more disposed towards one or the other. I have never been disposed, or good at, the first kind and do like the second, so I would mention that as the second skill or attitude that is useful for doing this sort of work.

In which discipline or field would you situate yourself, or would we have to invent a discipline to match your work?

I like disciplines, but I do not always feel that I entirely belong to any of them. That said, I read with enormous profit the works of historians, political theorist, anthropologists, of people in the field of science and technology studies, geographers, political economists and scholars in environmental studies. There are so many different disciplines that are well organized and have their practitioners from which there is a lot to learn! But conversely, I also think, in ways I have described already, there is something to be learnt for some people from working in a much more deliberately post-disciplinary fashion. The Middle East, South Asian and African Studies department to which I have been attached here in Columbia for about five years, represents a deliberate attempt by myself and my colleagues to produce some kind of post-disciplinary space. Not in order to do away with the disciplines, but to have another place for doing theoretical work, one that is able to take advantage of not being bound by disciplinary fields, as even broad disciplines—say history—tend to restrict you with a kind of positive liberty of creating a place where you can do anything you want—as long as you do it in an archive. I quite deliberately situate myself outside of any one discipline, while continuing to learn from and trespass into the fields of many individual disciplines. They range from all of those and others, because I am here among a community of people who are also philologists; people interested in Arabic literature and the history of Islamic science; and all kinds of fields, which I also find fascinating. The first article I ever published was in the field of Arabic grammar! So I have interests that fit in a very sort of trans-disciplinary, post-disciplinary environment and I thrive on that.

Yet doing this kind of post-disciplinary work is in a practical sense actually absolutely impossible. If only for the simple fact that if it is already hardly possible to keep up with 'the literature' if one is firmly situated within one field, then one can never keep up with important developments in all the disciplines one is interested in. There are some people that manage to do this and do it justice. My information about contemporary debates in every imaginable field is so limited; I do not manage to do justice to any field. In the particular piece of research I might be engaged in, I try to get quickly up to pace on what's going on, and I often come back again and again to similar areas of research. I am currently interested in questions around the early history of international development in the 1940's and 1950's, and that is something I have worked on before, but I have come back to it and I found that the World Bank archives are now open and there is a whole new set of literatures. I had not been keeping up with all of that work. It is hard and that is why I am very bad at answering emails and doing many of the other everyday things that one is ought to do; because it always seems to me, in the evening at the computer when one ought to be catching up with emails, there is something you have come across in an article or footnotes and before you know it you are miles away and it has got nothing to do with what you were working on at the moment, but it really connects with a set of issues you have been interested in and has taken you off into contemporary work going on in law or the history of architecture... The internet has made that possible in a completely new way and some of these post-disciplinary research interests are actually a reflection of where we are with the internet and with the accessibility of scholarship in any field only just a few clicks away. Which on the one hand is fascinating, but mostly it is just

a complete curse. It is the enemy of writing dissertations and finishing books and articles and everything else!

What role does expertise, which is kind of a central term in underpinning much of the diverse work or topics you do, play in the historical unfolding of modern government?

That is a big question, so let me suggest only a couple of thoughts here. One is that modern government has unfolded—especially if one thinks of government itself as a wider process than just a state—through the development of new forms of expertise, which among other things define problems and issues upon which government can operate. This can concern many things, whether it is problems of public health in the 19th or 20th century; or problems of economic development in the 20th century; or problems of energy, climate change and the environment today. Again and again government itself operates—as Foucault has taught us—simultaneously as fields of knowledge and fields of power. And the objects brought into being in this way—defined in important ways through the development of expert knowledge—become in themselves modes through which political power operates. Thanks to Foucault and many others, that is a way of thinking or field of research that has been widely developed, even though there are vast amounts of work still to do.

But I think there is another relationship between modes of government and expertise, and this goes back to things I have been thinking about ever since I wrote an article about the theory of the state (*The Limits of the State*, pdf [here](#)) that was published in *American Political Science Review* a long time ago (1991). The point I made then, is that it is interesting to observe how one of the central aspects of modern modes of power is the way that the distinction between what is the state and what is not the state; between what is public and what is private, is constantly elaborated and redefined. So politics itself is happening not so much by some agency called ‘state’ or ‘government’ imposing its will on some other preformed object—the social, the population, the people—but rather that it concerns a series of techniques that create what I have called the *effect* of a state: the very distinction between what appears as a sort of structure or apparatus of power, and the objects on which that power works.

More recently one of the ways I have thought about this, is in terms of the history of the idea of the economy. Most people think of ‘the economy’ either as something that has always existed (and people may or may not have realized its existence) or as something that came into being with the rise of political economy and commercial society in the European 18th and 19th century. One of the things I discovered when I was doing research on the history of development, is that no economist talked routinely about an object called ‘the economy’ before the 1940’s! I think that is a good example of the history of a mode of expertise that exists not within the operations of an apparatus of government but precisely outside of government.

If you look in detail at how the term ‘the economy’ was first regularly used, you find that it was in the context of governing the U.S. in the 1940’s immediately after the Second World War. In the aftermath of the war there was enormous political pressure for quite a radical restructuring of American society: there were waves of strikes, demands for worker control of industries, or at least a share of management. And of course in Europe, similar demands led to new forms of economy altogether, in the building of postwar Germany and in the forms of democratic socialism that were experimented with in various parts of Western Europe. As we know, the U.S. did not follow that path. And I think part of the way in which it was steered away from that path, was by constructing the economy as the central object of government, coupled with precisely this American cultural fear of things where government did not belong. So this was radically opposed to how the Europeans related government to economy: European governments had become

involved in all kinds of ways, deciding how the relation between management and labor should operate in thinking about prices and wages; instituting forms of national health insurance and health care; and the whole state management of health care itself... Now this was threatening to emerge in the U.S., and was emerging in many ways in the wartime with state control of prices and production. In order to prevent the U.S. from following the European path after the war, this object *outside* of government with its *own* experts was created: the economy. And the economists were precisely people who are not *in* government, but who knew the laws and regularities of economic life and could explain them to people. It is interesting to think about expertise both as something that develops within the state, but also as something that happens as a creation of objects that precisely represent what is *not* the state, or the sphere of government.

Your most recent book *Carbon Democracy* (2011) focuses on the political structures afforded, or engendered, by modes of extraction of minerals and investigates how oil ~~was~~ constitutes a dominant source of energy on which we depend. Can you give an example of how that works?

Let me take an example from the book even though I might have to give it in very a simplified form in order to make it work. I was interested in what appeared to be the way in which the rise of coal—the dominant source of energy in the 19th century and in the emergence of modern industrialized states—seemed to be very strongly associated with the emergence of mass democracy, whereas the rise of oil in the 20th century seemed to have if anything the opposite set of consequences for states that were highly dependent on the production of oil. I wanted to examine these relations between forms of energy and democratic politics in a way that was not simply some kind of technical- or energy determinism, because it is very easy to point to many cases that simply do not fit that pattern—and, besides, it simply would not be very interesting to begin with. But it did seem to me, that at a particular moment in the history of the emergence of industrialized countries—particularly in the late 19th century—it became possible for the first time in history and really only for a brief period, to take advantage of certain kinds of vulnerabilities and possibilities offered by the dependence on coal to organize a new kind of political agency and forms of mass politics, which successfully struggled for much more representative and egalitarian forms of democracy, roughly between the 1880's and the mid 20th century. In general terms, that story is known; but it had been told without thinking in particular about the energy itself. The energy was just present in these stories as that which made possible industrialization; industrialization made possible urbanization; therefore you had lots of workers and their consciousness must somehow have changed and made them democratic or something.

That story did not make sense to me, and that prompted me to research in detail, and drawing on the work of others who had looked even more in detail at, the history of struggles for a whole set of democratic rights. The accounts of people at the time were clear: what was distinctive was this peculiar ability to shut down an economy because of a specific vulnerability to the supply of energy. Very briefly, when I switched to telling the story in the middle of the 20th with oil, it is different: partly just because oil was a supplementary source of energy—countries and people now had a choice between different energy sources—but also because oil did not create the same points of vulnerability. There are fewer workers involved, it is a liquid, so it can be routed along different channels more easily; there is a whole set of technical properties of oil and its production that are different. That does not mean to say that the energy is determining the outcome of history or of political struggles, and I am careful to introduce examples that do not work easily one way or the other in the history of oil industry in [Baku](#), which is much more similar to the history of coal or the oil industry in California for that matter. But you can pay

attention to the technical dimensions in a certain way, and the to the sheer possibilities that arise with this enormous concentration of sources of energy—which reflects both an exponential increase in the amount of energy but also an unprecedented concentration of the sites at which energy is available and through which it flows—that you can tell a new story about democratic politics and about that moment in the history of industrialized countries, but also the subsequent history in oil-producing countries in a different way. That would be an example of how attention for technical expertise translates into a different understanding of the politics of oil.

This leads to my next question, which is how do you speak about materials or technologies without falling into the trap of either radical social reductionism or a kind of Marxist technological determinism? Do you get these accusations sometimes?

Yes, I think so, but more so from people who have not read my work and who just hear some talks about it or some secondary accounts. To me, so much of the literature that already existed on these questions around oil and democracy, or even earlier research on coal, industrialization and democracy, suffered from a kind of technical determinism because they actually did not go into the technical. They said: ‘look, you’ve got all this oil’ or ‘look, you had all that coal and steam power’ and out of that, in a very determinist fashion, emerged social movements or emerged political repression. This was determinist because such accounts had actually jumped over the technical side much too fast: talking about oil in the case of the resource curse literature, it was only interested in the oil *once it had already become money*. And once it was money, then it of course corrupts, or you buy people off, or you do not have to seek their votes. The whole question of how oil *becomes* money and how you put together that technical system that turns oil into forms of political power or turns coal into forms of political power, does not get opened up. And that to me makes those arguments—even though there is not much of the technical in them—technically very determinist. Because as soon as you start opening up the technical side of it, you realize there are so many ways things can go and so many different ways things can get built. Energy networks can be built in different ways and there can be different mixes of energy. Of course most of the differences are technical differences, but they are also human differences. It is precisely by being very attentive to the technical aspects of politics—like energy or anything else, it could be in agriculture, it could be in disease, it could be in any area of collective socio-technical life—that one finds the only way to get away from a certain kind of technical determinism that otherwise sort of rules us. In the economics of growth, for instance, there is this great externality of technological change that drives every sort of grand historical explanation. Technology is just something that is kept external to the explanatory model and accounts for everything else that the model cannot explain. That ends up being a terrible kind of technical determinism.

The other half of the question is how this might differ from Marxist approaches to some of these problems. I like to think that if Marx was studying oil, his approach would be very little different. Because if you read Marx himself, there is an extraordinary level of interest in the technical; that is, whether in the technical aspects of political economy as a field of knowledge in the 19th century, or in the factory as a technical space. So, conventional political economy to him was not just an ideological mask that had to be torn away so that you could reveal the true workings of capitalism. Political economy has produced a set of concepts—notions of value, notions of exchange, notions of labor—that actually formed part of the technical workings of capitalism. The factory was organized at a technical level that had very specific consequences. The trouble with a significant part of Marx's theories is that he stopped doing that kind of technical work and Marxism froze itself with a set of categories that may or may not have been relevant to a moment of 19th century capitalism. There is still a lot of interesting Marxist theory going on, and some of

the contemporary Italian Marxist theory I find really interesting and profitable to read, for example. Some of the work in Marxist geography continues to be very productive. But at the same time there are aspects of my work that are different from that—such as my drawing on Foucault in understanding expertise and modes of power.

How come so many of the social sciences seem to stick so rigidly to the human or social side of the Cartesian divide? It seems to be constitutive of social science disciplines but on the other hand also radically reduces the scope of what it can actually ‘see’ and talk about.

I think you are right and it has never made much sense to me. I suppose I have approached it in two kinds of ways in my work. First, this kind of dualism was much more clearly an object of concern in some of the early work I published on the colonial era, including my first book, *Colonising Egypt* (1988), where I was trying to understand the process by which Europeans had, as it were, come to be Cartesians; had come to see the world as very neatly defined it into mind on the one hand and matter or on the other—or, as they tended to think of it, representations on the one hand and reality on the other. And I actually looked in some detail, at the technical level, at this—beginning with world exhibitions, but moving on to department stores and school systems and modern legal orders—to understand the processes by which our incredibly complicated world was engineered so as to produce the effect of this world divided into the two—of mind or representation or culture on the one hand, and reality, nature, material on the other.

Second, what were the effects, what were the repetitive practices, that made that kind of simple dualism seem so self-evident and taken for granted? All that early work still informs my current work, although I do not necessarily explore this as directly as I did. One of the things I try to do is avoid all the vocabulary that draws you into that kind of dualism. So, nowhere when I write, do I use a term like ‘culture’, because you are just heading straight down that Cartesian road as soon as you assume that there is some hermetic world of shared meanings—as opposed to what? As opposed to machines that do not involve instructions and all kinds of other things that we would think of as meaningful? So I just work more by avoiding some of the dualistic language; the other kind would be the entire set of debates—in almost every discipline of the social sciences—around the question of ‘structure versus agency’ which just doesn't seem to me particularly productive. And I have been very lucky, recently, in coming across work in the fields of science and technology studies, because it is a field of people studying machines, studying laboratories and studying people, a field that took nature itself as something to be opened-up and investigated. In taking apart these things, they realized that those kinds of dualisms made absolutely no sense. And they have done away with them in their modes of explanation quite a long time ago. So there was already a lot in my own work before I encountered Science and Technology Studies (STS) that was working in that direction; but the STS people have been at it for a long time and figured out a lot of things that I had only just discovered.

Can you explain why it seems that perhaps implicitly decolonization, or the postcolonial moment—which is understood within political science and in development literature as a radical moment of rupture in which a complete transfer of responsibility has taken place, instituted in sovereignty—is an important theme in your work?

I have actually been coming back to this in recent work, because I am currently looking again at that moment of decolonization in Egypt. The period after World War II, around the [1952 revolution](#) and the debacle around the building and the financing of the [Aswan Dam](#), constitutes a wonderful way to explore questions on how much change decolonization really engendered and to see how remarkably short-lived that sort of optimism about decolonization, meaning a transfer of responsibility and sovereignty, actually was. Of course decolonization did transfer responsibility and sovereignty in all kinds of ways, but then that was exactly the problem for the former colonial regimes: because, from their perspective, then, how were all the people who had profited before from things like colonialism to continue to make profits? The plan to build the High Dam at Aswan—although there has always been Egyptians interested in it—initially got going because of some German engineering firms... For them, there was no opportunity in doing any kind of this large-scale work in Europe at the time because of the dire economic situation there. But they knew that Egypt had rapidly growing revenues from the Suez Canal and so they got together with the British and the French, and said: let's put forward this scheme for a dam so that we can recycle those revenues—particularly the income from the Suez Canal, which was about to revert to Egyptian ownership—back into the pockets of the engineering firms, or of the banks that will make the loans and charge the fees. And that is where the scheme came from. Then the World Bank got involved, because it too had found it had got nothing to do in Europe in the way of development and reconstruction, so it invented this new field of development. And it became a conduit to get the Wall Street banks involved as well. And the whole thing became politicized and led to a rupture, which provided then the excuse for another group, the militarists, the MI6 people, to invade and try to overthrow Nasser. So just in the space of barely four years from that moment of decolonization, Egypt had been reinvaded by the French, the British, working with the Israelis, and had to deal with the consequences and the costs of destroyed cities and military spending. That is an example of how quickly things went wrong; but also of how part of their going wrong was in this desperate attempt by a series of European banks and engineering firms trying to recover the opportunities for a certain profit-making and business that they had enjoyed in the colonial period and now they suddenly were being deprived of.

Last question. Has your work helped you make sense of what is currently going on in Egypt and would you shine your enlightened light on that a bit? Not on the whole general situation but perhaps on parts which are overlooked or which you find particularly relevant.

May be in a couple of aspects. One of them is this kind of very uneasy and disjunctive assemblage relationship between the West and forms of political Islam. It sometimes seemed shocking and disturbing and destabilizing that the political process in Egypt led to the rise and consolidation of power of the Muslim Brotherhood. But of course the U.S. and other Western powers have had a very long relationship going back at least to the 1950's—if not before—with exactly these kinds of political forces or people who were locally in alliance with them, in places like Saudi Arabia. I have a chapter in *Carbon Democracy* that explores that relationship and its disjunctions. And I think it is important to get away from the notion that is just a sort of electoral politics and uneasy alliances, but it is actually the outcome of a longer problem. Both domestically within the politics in the Arab states, of how to found a form of legitimacy that does not seem to be based on close ideological ties with the West, but at the same time operates in such in a way, that in practical terms, that kind of alliance can work. So that would be one aspect of it, to have a slightly longer-term perspective on those kinds of relationships and how disjunctively they function.

The other thing, drawing it a little more directly on some of the work on democracy in *Carbon Democracy*, is that so much of the scholarship on democracy is about equipping people with the

right mental tools to be democrats; the right levels of trust or interpersonal relations or whatever. There is a very different view in my book, that the opportunities for effective democratic politics require very different sets of skills and kinds of actions—actions that are much more as it were obstructionist, and forms of sabotage, quite literally, in the usage of the term as it comes into being in the early 20th century to describe the role of strikes and stoppages. These are, I attempt to show, the effective tools to leverage demands for representation in more egalitarian democratic politics. I have been very interested in the case of Egypt, in the particular places and points of vulnerability, that gave rise to the possibility of sabotage. For instance, one of the less noted aspects of the Egyptian revolution in general, was the very important role played by the labor movement; this was not just a Twitter or Facebook revolution, but that was important as well. Although the labor movement was very heavily concentrated in industries—in the textile industry—the first group of workers who actually successfully formed an independent union were the property tax collectors. And there is a reason for that: there was a certain kind of fiscal crisis of the state—which had to do with declining oil revenues and other things—and there was the attempt to completely revise the tax system and to revise it not around income tax—because there were too few people making a significant income to raise tax revenues—but around *property* taxes. And that was a point of vulnerability and contestation that produced not just some of the first large-scale strikes but strikes that were effective enough that the government was forced to recognize a newly independent labor movement. This case is an instance of how the kind of work I did in the book might be useful for thinking about how the revolutionary situation emerged in Egypt.

Timothy Mitchell is a political theorist and historian. His areas of research include the place of colonialism in the making of modernity, the material and technical politics of the Middle East, and the role of economics and other forms of expert knowledge in the government of collective life. Much of his current work is concerned with ways of thinking about politics that allow material and technical things more weight than they are given in conventional political theory. Educated at Queens' College, Cambridge, where he received a first-class honours degree in History, Mitchell completed his Ph.D. in Politics and Near Eastern Studies at Princeton University in 1984. He joined Columbia University in 2008 after teaching for twenty-five years at New York University, where he served as Director of the Center for Near Eastern Studies. At Columbia he teaches courses on the history and politics of the Middle East, colonialism, and the politics of technical things.

Related links:

- [Faculty Profile at Colombia University](#)
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- Read Mitchell's *The Limits of the State: Beyond Statist Approaches and Their Critics* (The American Political Science Review 1991) [here](#) (pdf)
- Read Mitchell's *McJihad: Islam and the U.S. Global Order* (Social Text 2002) [here](#) (pdf)
- Read Mitchell's *The Stage of Modernity* (Chapter from book 'Questions of Modernity', 2000) [here](#) (pdf)
- Read Mitchell's *The World as Exhibition* (Chapter from book 'Colonising Egypt' 1991) [here](#) (pdf)