



4-15-1996

The Represented and the 'Real': Economy, Postmodernity, and PostOrientalist Research

Katherine Jones
University of Kentucky

Jennifer Kopf
University of Kentucky

Angela Martin
University of Kentucky

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.13023/DISCLOSURE.05.11>

Follow this and additional works at: <https://uknowledge.uky.edu/disclosure>



Part of the [Political Science Commons](#)

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 License](#).



Recommended Citation

Jones, Katherine; Kopf, Jennifer; and Martin, Angela (1996) "The Represented and the 'Real': Economy, Postmodernity, and PostOrientalist Research," *disClosure: A Journal of Social Theory*. Vol. 5 , Article 11.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.13023/DISCLOSURE.05.11>

Available at: <https://uknowledge.uky.edu/disclosure/vol5/iss1/11>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by *disClosure: A Journal of Social Theory*. Questions about the journal can be sent to disclosurejournal@gmail.com

**The Represented and the 'Real':
Economy, Postmodernity, and PostOrientalist Research**

**An Interview with Timothy Mitchell
Department of Politics, New York University**

**Conducted by Katherine Jones, Jennifer Kopf, and Angela Martin
disClosure Editorial Collective**

**Lexington, Kentucky
April 16, 1995**

This interview was conducted during a visit Timothy Mitchell made to the University of Kentucky to give the lecture "Inventing 'The Economy'" as part of the 1995 Spring Social Theory Lecture Series sponsored by the University's multidisciplinary Committee on Social Theory. In this lecture, Professor Mitchell suggested that the concept of a 'national economy' is a very recent one, which emerged only after the 1930's depression and the widespread collapse of global systems of monetary representation. In their place, according to Mitchell, the concept of 'the economy' emerged as a totality of exchange processes within the boundaries of a fixed nation-state. The notion of 'the economy' as a fixed object was therefore central in emerging discourses of the nation-state as a fixed, bounded, geopolitical unit. Further, 'the economy' excluded 'non-economic' processes. Such public/private distinctions helped to maintain and re-create the effect of 'the economy'.

In addition to his recent work on 'the economy', Professor Mitchell has also written extensively on related issues. His 1988 book, *Colonising Egypt* explores the discursive construction of a British colonial rationality in 19th century Egypt. Dr. Mitchell has also written on the discourse of 'development' in Egypt and elsewhere, and on definitions of 'the state' as an object.

In this interview, Professor Mitchell discusses his past and ongoing research, methodological issues related to doing 'postorientalist' studies of the Middle East, gender and 'development', and Frederick Jameson's view of postmodernity.

Connections/background/intellectual linkages

disClosure: We are interested in your background and the background of your projects. Whose work has influenced yours? How did the research which led to *Colonising Egypt* take shape?

Mitchell: How did I come to write that book? About half of it was my dissertation. When I first began that project I was interested in questions about colonial education and knowledge. While doing the research, I found myself continually moving outside the rather narrow study of the creation of colonial educational institutions. The people who were building the schools were also involved in the planning and rebuilding of modern Cairo and in efforts to regulate health care; they also served in the army and were involved in introducing reforms there. They traveled and wrote about their encounters with and impressions of Europe. Even if I had never read any Foucault, I would have been making a lot of connections between a series of practices that, at least in the study of colonial Egypt, had not been connected together in the same way before. My initial concern was entirely with an idea of order, which seemed to permeate all these different arms of colonial practice. I was using the word 'colonial' not simply to mean what the British did when they finally took control of Egypt in 1882, but for a whole series of modernist practices that took shape, partly under the influence of Europeans—more French than British—but also, and more centrally, carried out by a locally constituted, principally Turko-Egyptian elite, which itself was involved in efforts to colonize other areas of the region: expand into the Sudan, Arabia, Palestine, and Syria.

In fact, the dissertation had a different title, 'As If the World Were Divided in Two'. This phrase was written by an Egyptian who was complaining about the emergence of Orientalist views of Egypt as belonging to another world, outside the West, whereas educated Egyptians saw themselves as part of the civilized world, and therefore to be included in any definition of civilization. Of course this was about the time that *Orientalism*¹ was published, and I became interested in a whole series of questions about representation. I think the critical difference between the dissertation and the book, *Colonising Egypt*, was the engagement with Heidegger—the rethinking of a whole series of issues around representation outside of a Foucaultian framework—the engagement with Derrida, and finally, the development of the theme of the exhibition, the representation of Egypt in the European world exhibition, as a figure through which to explore more broadly modernist ideas about representation. The critical link that I

¹Said, Edward. 1978. *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon.

tried to create was between a certain modernist notion of meaning, meaning as representation, and the sort of Foucaultian methods of ordering and organizing space and bodies, showing that the same principle of abstraction can be seen at work in both sets of practices.

disClosure: The three people you've mentioned so far are Foucault, Heidegger and Derrida. Who else do you see in your roots, that you think is important? Who else has influenced you?

Mitchell: It's hard to say. Obviously I also mentioned Said and *Orientalism*, that book was very important. And the other person who, at that time, late seventies, early eighties, that I read a lot of was Bourdieu. There's that section in the book² where I offer a rereading of Bourdieu's own reading of a North African house, to suggest a different way of understanding the relationship between structure and representation. But I've always found Bourdieu extremely interesting. I've been interested in the problematic nature of the dualities he examines, questions of structure and agency, representation and the real. We go about it in different ways because Bourdieu's fundamental concern is how to theorize in a way that overcomes those dualities, whereas my fundamental concern is, not only that, but how the apparent obviousness and stability and power of those dualities are constructed in different kinds of contexts. I don't know about any others who were as significant as any of those. The other things that went into *Colonising Egypt* were not intellectual influences per se; they were a long fascination with plans and planning and building. I possibly should have been an architect instead of a political theorist.

disClosure: Why an architect?

Mitchell: Well, I've always been thoroughly fascinated by maps, by plans, by drawing of plans, and structures, and everything of that sort. And I was never really conscious of any of that in the writing of *Colonising Egypt*, but now in retrospect, it seems to be enormously funny that I became so preoccupied with some of those issues given that I am also interested in them in other kinds of ways. In high school my favorite subject was geography.

disClosure: Well, in a sense, you've been able to be both an anthropologist and a geographer, as well as a political theorist, haven't you?

²*Colonising Egypt*, pp.48-62.

Mitchell: That's the wonderful thing about academic work today, particularly fields like political and social theory, that you can cross over these disciplinary boundaries. And not just cross boundaries, but do work that is genuinely post-disciplinary, in all kinds of ways.

disClosure: When you were doing the research for *Colonising Egypt*, was it done mostly in archives, or did you go out into the countryside? You've mentioned doing research in the village of Bu'airat.

Mitchell: No, my work in Bu'airat more recent, the last five years. I had seen nothing of rural Egypt in the first three years I was there. I was entirely in Cairo, I was mostly working in the national library, and wanted to write a library piece entirely. I probably would have written a different book if I'd written it after spending time in rural Egypt, as I have subsequently. I say this not only because I would have had this rather different sort of immediate geographical sense of the country, and would have paid much more attention to certain kinds of issues to do with the countryside and the way forms of control were established there. But also because I would have paid more attention to the construction of Egypt itself as an object. There's a slight allusion to that, but I think that as a book, *Colonising Egypt* still enables you to take a little too much for granted the idea that Egypt existed in the nineteenth century as a pre-established object.

Egypt was still very much something which was in the process of construction right through the nineteenth century. First of all in the sense that as the century begins, Cairo is a place that has only intermittently ruled over much of what is today called Egypt. There had been periods of centralized power, when Cairo controlled most of the Nile Valley, but much of the time there were other centers of power, both in the South and also in parts of the Delta in the North. What brought this to mind is the experience of working in the village in the South, near Luxor, where an older generation of men will still say to you "We're not Egyptian; we're Arabs". Egyptians are, for them, those rather inferior people who live in the cities and do some of the farming in the North. Arabs are real men, the people who inhabit most of the villages of the South. So, these are the kinds of ways in which the construction of Egypt and Egyptian national identity is still very loose, for certain people. It is these people whose experience of the colonial project I don't cover very well in *Colonising Egypt*.

disClosure: Is this work in the village of Bu'airat part of a follow-up to *Colonising Egypt*?

disClosure: REASON INCorporated

Mitchell: Yes, it could be considered a follow-up in that I'm still working in Egypt and I'm still interested in the theoretical issues that I raised in *Colonising Egypt*. But this new project is not simply a chronological account continuing from where I left off in *Colonising Egypt*. It's still rather large and inchoate—much of the work has involved rural Egypt, both the research I've been doing in this village in the South, and a series of essays and projects I've been working on, concerned with constructions and representations of rural Egypt through economic discourse and through the tourist industry.

disClosure: We also understand that you have embarked on a new project considering the issue of 'the economy' as a construction, and you gave a paper on this theme for the Committee on Social Theory Speaker Series here at the University of Kentucky. Could you discuss where this work fits into your overall approach?

Mitchell: The current that I've been working on more recently is around the question of the economy and that's become a much larger project in its own right, which may have to be dealt with separately before I come back to completing the work on Egypt. One of the things that came out of the research I've been doing in this village has been the enormously problematic notion of 'the economy'. I became interested in the whole history of the idea of 'the economy' and discovered that the very idea of 'the economy' as a distinct, internally-interrelated whole dates not from the political economists of the eighteenth and nineteenth century—as even Foucault, for example, assumes—but only from the 1930's. Prior to that nobody spoke of 'the economy' as a self-contained sphere in the way that we have come to think about it. I've become interested in the process of how that category was constructed as a separate sphere. I am interested in its relationship to the dramatic political changes taking place in the period after World War I, which included the Great Depression, the creation of the Soviet Union, and the beginning of the end of colonialism in places like Egypt and India. The birth of 'the economy' was related to the collapse in an entire way of thinking about the global order that was destroyed by World War I and the crises that followed it.

An older, imperially-organized financial, political, economic order was being replaced by a notion of the nation in a new sense, of the national state, that has only much more recently taken its central place in our political discourse. We tend to think the national state had its origins in the middle part of the nineteenth century, but it really comes into central significance after World War I with the formation of what they decided to call the League of Nations and then the formation of the economy, whose geographic referent was this object, the nation-state.

disClosure 5 (1996): REASON INCorporated

The discipline of economics never theorized this creation of the national state. It played a role in the process, by inventing the new field of macro-economics and developing national income accounts and the idea of GNP, in the 1930's and 1940's. Economic discourse took the national economy as its new object and in taking it for granted helped create the obviousness of the idea of the nation as *the* political unit. At the same time, the construction of the economy was a principal means of constructing the twentieth-century state. The economy was invented as the central object of the mid-twentieth-century state, a state based on scientific expertise, rational planning, and vast bureaucratic powers. The vocabulary of economics replaced public law as the dominant language of the state, and, to the annoyance of political scientists ever since, economics became the true political science.

The creation of the state as this apparently separate site of rationality, science, planning, and intentionality, portrayed in social science as an object and an intelligence standing outside society, is what I have called elsewhere the effect of the state.³ The creation of this effect in the mid-twentieth century is the larger context of the invention of the economy.

I have been working on this question of the economy mostly in terms of American, British, and to some extent Continental European history. But I also plan to bring these ideas back to thinking about Egyptian politics in the middle decades of the twentieth century. There was a significant shift in Egyptian political discourse in this period, as Egypt experienced the same global crisis. But in the case of Egypt this does not seem to have involved organizing politics around 'the economy', something that occurred much later, after the mid-1960's.

The domestic: changing regimes, constant explanations

disClosure: You have talked about the construction of the economy, and about its two exteriors—the state being one and the domestic being the other. The economy is based on the domestic, but it's also based on excluding the domestic as a separate sphere. Can you talk a little bit about how that happened—what was going on in Europe and in the West in the inter-war period so as to separate those two out?

³See Mitchell, T. 1991. "The Limits of the State: Beyond Statist Approaches and Their Critics." *American Political Science Review*. 85:77-96.

Mitchell: You're quite right, and I haven't given that the thought that I should. Presumably, in this period, from the twenties or thirties through into the 1970's, one is looking at the era of the nuclear family; it almost exactly corresponds. The invention of 'the economy' coincides with the slowing of population growth in the advanced industrial countries (the idea of the economy and its GNP made it possible to imagine economic growth without the growth of population), and with the Fordist construction of the self-contained nuclear family as an object that exists to consume. Doubtless there is a close connection between the construction of the economy and the reorganization of the household into an isolated unit of consumption. And the household is also the site of the extensive labor of reproduction and domestic cleanliness that, because it is unpaid, will be excluded from the new calculation of the economy. So creating the Fordist economy required the nuclear family, and constructing the isolated, exploitative domesticity of the new household in turn required the idea of the economy as an external, self-contained sphere of monetarized relationships, to which the family did not belong.

disClosure: And that would probably necessitate bringing gender into your work a lot more than has been the case so far. Can you talk a little bit about that?

Mitchell: I don't think that gender was absent from *Colonising Egypt*. It didn't play an enormous role, but I was interested in the issue and in fact there is a discussion of Qasim Amin, the Egyptian writer who has been influential in debates on gender because he wrote a book on the liberation of women at the turn of the century. I introduce a number of arguments related to the relationship of gender to colonialism which I probably should have developed more fully, particularly with regard to the construction of domesticity as a site of discipline. There was a collaboration of sorts between the British and an Egyptian liberal elite on this issue. The program of reform included constructing a new domestic disciplinarity. The central theme is that of education, which in Arabic means something broader than the English term, more like the term "formation". It refers to the entire upbringing, the formation of the individual. This process of the formation or education of the individual comes to express in the 1860's and 1870's and onwards the central purpose of the state in relation to the population. At the same time, with writers like Qasim Amin, it is now conceived as the central role and purpose of women. And this upbringing is going to be a scientific process. It's going to require the unveiling of women, the abandoning of what was formerly constructed and seen as the harem, because women have got to have a modern, scientific knowledge that is going to enable them to undertake scientifically the formation of the subjects of the state.

There were ideas like these that I just covered in a couple of pages, which I wish I had developed much more fully. More recently there's been a series of books and articles by a number of historians of Egypt looking at this period that have begun to take the question of gender up in more detail, but unfortunately not, in my mind, sufficiently critical of concepts like domesticity and education. They've taken a rather too liberal view of what these processes were about.

disClosure: In this vein, in *Colonising Egypt*, you critique the connection made by British colonial administrators between the development of nations and the "development of women", as shown in the following passage:

A particular theme that could be drawn from these political discussion of the Egyptian mentality was a link between the country's "moral inferiority" and the status of its woman. The retarded development of the nation corresponded, it could now be argued, to the retarded development of the Egyptian woman. This was a favourite theme of the British colonial administrators. "The position of the woman in Egypt", wrote Lord Cromer, is "a fatal obstacle to the attainment of that elevation of thought and character which should accompany the introduction of European civilisation." This civilisation would not succeed, he argued, if the position which woman occupy in Europe is abstracted from the general plan (*Colonising Egypt*, p. 111).

Surprisingly, I noticed substantial similarities between this idea (of linking the development of the nation to a certain disciplining of women) and a number of very recent works on "Women in Development". For example:

Experts believe that African women, who are heavily involved in food production and processing, as well as in fuel gathering, have few alternatives at present but to have more children in hopes of sharing their work load. Finding ways of alleviating women's work, enhancing their access to education and health, and providing them with options will almost certainly curtail population growth (*Africa Report*, vol 36, no.2, March/April 1991, pp. 64-66).

It seems that these recent writings which purport to be emancipatory or liberating are, in fact, quite similar to the material you discussed from the colonial period. Would you care to comment on these recent representations of women's role in the economic development of a society?

Mitchell: They're wonderful quotes; Lord Cromer could have written either of them. There's still an entire discourse of that nature—you won't quite find the phrase "the liberation of women", but instead it's "alleviating women's work" or "enhancing

disClosure: REASON INCorporated

their access to education and health". But it is entirely within the developmentalist framework of increasing productivity that Lord Cromer himself shared, even though the words are slightly different. It's "moral inferiority" and "civilization" in one place and "development" and "containing the population growth" in another, but they're working within the same general framework, in which women are identified as a special obstacle to progress of the nation. There are brief passages in *Colonising Egypt* that develop this theme, but not as many as there might have been, and I regret that. It will be a much more significant element in my writing on Bu'airat. My paper, "Inventing the Economy" discusses the debate's about women's domestic labor, and the difficulties of making sense of women's lives in terms of the conventional concept of the economy. That kind of issue is an important part of my project.

Reactions and receptions

disClosure: Earlier you mentioned doing fieldwork in an Egyptian village, and I was wondering, how has your work been received there, both generally in Egypt, and also at the village level?

Mitchell: I've been very lucky in that I've published both *Colonising Egypt* and some of my subsequent essays in Arabic. A little less lucky in getting the Egyptian government to allow distribution of these books in Cairo. The *Colonising Egypt* is fine, that doesn't worry them.

disClosure: Because it's about the past?

Mitchell: Yes, or so they assume. The other book is a collection of essays, most of which I've also published in English. I was originally going to publish them in Arabic under the title "America's Egypt". But that would never have made it past the censors, so we ended up giving it the rather ungainly title, "Egypt in American Discourse." Even then, I couldn't get it published in Cairo. It was published in Cyprus by a Damascus-based Palestinian publishing house.⁴

disClosure: Is it in Egypt now?

⁴See Mitchell, T. 1992. *Egypt in American Discourse*. Cyprus: 'Aybal Publishers. (in Arabic)

disClosure 5 (1996): REASON INCorporated

There were ideas like these that I just covered in a couple of pages, which I wish I had developed much more fully. More recently there's been a series of books and articles by a number of historians of Egypt looking at this period that have begun to take the question of gender up in more detail, but unfortunately not, in my mind, sufficiently critical of concepts like domesticity and education. They've taken a rather too liberal view of what these processes were about.

disClosure: In this vein, in *Colonising Egypt*, you critique the connection made by British colonial administrators between the development of nations and the "development of women", as shown in the following passage:

A particular theme that could be drawn from these political discussion of the Egyptian mentality was a link between the country's "moral inferiority" and the status of its woman. The retarded development of the nation corresponded, it could now be argued, to the retarded development of the Egyptian woman. This was a favourite theme of the British colonial administrators. "The position of the woman in Egypt", wrote Lord Cromer, is "a fatal obstacle to the attainment of that elevation of thought and character which should accompany the introduction of European civilisation." This civilisation would not succeed, he argued, if the position which woman occupy in Europe is abstracted from the general plan (*Colonising Egypt*, p. 111).

Surprisingly, I noticed substantial similarities between this idea (of linking the development of the nation to a certain disciplining of women) and a number of very recent works on "Women in Development". For example:

Experts believe that African women, who are heavily involved in food production and processing, as well as in fuel gathering, have few alternatives at present but to have more children in hopes of sharing their work load. Finding ways of alleviating women's work, enhancing their access to education and health, and providing them with options will almost certainly curtail population growth (*Africa Report*, vol 36, no.2, March/April 1991, pp. 64-66).

It seems that these recent writings which purport to be emancipatory or liberating are, in fact, quite similar to the material you discussed from the colonial period. Would you care to comment on these recent representations of women's role in the economic development of a society?

Mitchell: They're wonderful quotes; Lord Cromer could have written either of them. There's still an entire discourse of that nature—you won't quite find the phrase "the liberation of women", but instead it's "alleviating women's work" or "enhancing

disClosure: REASON INCorporated

their access to education and health". But it is entirely within the developmentalist framework of increasing productivity that Lord Cromer himself shared, even though the words are slightly different. It's "moral inferiority" and "civilization" in one place and "development" and "containing the population growth" in another, but they're working within the same general framework, in which women are identified as a special obstacle to progress of the nation. There are brief passages in *Colonising Egypt* that develop this theme, but not as many as there might have been, and I regret that. It will be a much more significant element in my writing on Bu'airat. My paper, "Inventing the Economy" discusses the debate's about women's domestic labor, and the difficulties of making sense of women's lives in terms of the conventional concept of the economy. That kind of issue is an important part of my project.

Reactions and receptions

disClosure: Earlier you mentioned doing fieldwork in an Egyptian village, and I was wondering, how has your work been received there, both generally in Egypt, and also at the village level?

Mitchell: I've been very lucky in that I've published both *Colonising Egypt* and some of my subsequent essays in Arabic. A little less lucky in getting the Egyptian government to allow distribution of these books in Cairo. The *Colonising Egypt* is fine, that doesn't worry them.

disClosure: Because it's about the past?

Mitchell: Yes, or so they assume. The other book is a collection of essays, most of which I've also published in English. I was originally going to publish them in Arabic under the title "America's Egypt". But that would never have made it past the censors, so we ended up giving it the rather ungainly title, "Egypt in American Discourse." Even then, I couldn't get it published in Cairo. It was published in Cyprus by a Damascus-based Palestinian publishing house.⁴

disClosure: Is it in Egypt now?

⁴See Mitchell, T. 1992. *Egypt in American Discourse*. Cyprus: 'Aybal Publishers. (in Arabic)

disClosure 5 (1996): REASON INCorporated

Mitchell: Copies get in. There's an international book fair every January in Cairo, which is the biggest event in Arabic publishing. It's very easy to get books in to Egypt for that, because it's awkward for the government to prevent foreign Arab publishers bringing things in. They prevent some books, but things get in much more easily than other times of year. So I think a couple of thousand copies were brought in for the book fair in 1993, and the response was wonderful. People picked up on the book immediately, there was lots in the press about it, I did a couple of interviews. The book includes an article on the development discourse of USAID (an article that in English was called "America's Egypt"⁵) and there was a lot of interest and argument in the press.

disClosure: What were the 'sides' of the debate in the press?

Mitchell: Well, no one division of pro or con or anything, just people taking up and thinking about the ideas in different ways. Another article in the book is a critique of a popular American book that was published about the village of Bu'airat⁶, the same village where I have been doing research. It was interesting getting my critique of that book to the village, because the villagers knew that an American had come in the 1970's and written a book about them. They knew that the book was very unflattering; worse than that, that it had taken some very exaggerated village gossip about one or two unpleasant incidents that had occurred, various disputes in the village, and had embellished and retold those stories, and portrayed them as the life of the typical third world peasant. They knew exactly what this American writer had done and were enormously angry.

disClosure: Had they seen copies of the book?

Mitchell: Yes, the book was available. A local edition was published by the American University in Cairo Press and was sold in all the hotel bookstores. For any American or other English-speaking tourist in Egypt, this was the only book you could find about everyday life in contemporary Egypt. If you wanted to know about those exotic people you saw hiding behind their veils as you were bussed in and out of the Pharaonic monuments, this was the book to read, and it was sold in the bookstores in Luxor. I don't know whether at that point anyone from the village really read English well enough, but somebody had a friend in Luxor who read it and told them "Look,

⁵"America's Egypt: Discourse of the Development Industry." *Middle East Report*. 169 (1991):18-36.

⁶Critchfield, Richard. 1978. *Shahhat: An Egyptian*. Syracuse.

here's what it says about you". I was glad to be able both to confirm for them that their own sense of the book was mine, and then also publish in Arabic a critique of it. *Colonising Egypt* is now widely available, although it has a more restricted audience. But it deals, at least in some ways, with contemporary issues, and it's read in university circles, and by writers and intellectuals.

disClosure: I'm curious how your writing has been received in development studies. How did those in development react to Foucauldian notions of discourse, ordering, structuring?

Mitchell: I don't speak that way to development people. My engagement with development people has been through the article "America's Egypt", where Foucault is not mentioned by name, but he's in there. The experience of writing that article was interesting because I did research in the library of the USAID office in Cairo and I met a lot of USAID people. At that level—the project officers managing the spending of the money, or Americans who act as contractors to AID, independent development people who receive USAID money to undertake development projects—there is a very strong sense of what the problems are, what is wrong with the kinds of things that they're doing, the inadequacy of what they're doing, the misuse of the money, all these things. So, there was not a particularly hostile reaction at those levels. Higher up where people are defending these things politically, I'm sure there was. I didn't encounter that myself more directly.

The one published came from an academic, Alan Richards, who's an economist at the University of Santa Cruz. Richard's had shifted in the early eighties from earlier work presenting a rather mechanistic, quasi-Marxist account of the development of agricultural production in Egypt in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, to promoting the contemporary agenda of structural adjustment. As the main academic spokesperson for what USAID was trying to do in Egypt, he was providing from the university side the rationale and the expertise about Egyptian political economy that justified U.S. development policy. He has had several consulting posts funded by USAID, including most recently the chief academic consultant to USAID's so-called democratization initiative in the Middle East. Like all such consultants, he has received many, many tens of thousands of dollars from public funds, to write papers attacking the existence of the public sector in Egypt. He is probably the most state-subsidized American academic working on Egyptian political economy, and he attacked me for my suggestion that USAID exists principally to channel U.S. public funds to subsidize American corporations and individuals.

What's a researcher to do?

disClosure: Perhaps you could address some of the methodological issues related to doing this type of research. In *Colonising Egypt*, you point to several 'characters' who 'encounter' Egypt. There is the voyeur, "dressed in raincoats, with their quilted cotton hats and their green veils to protect themselves against ophthalmia" (p.26), the participant-observer, whose deception assured a distance which gave "objectivity" to his description (p.27), and the Orientalist, whose "expertise [is] institutionalised in the centres of colonial administration, in government ministries, and in universities" (p.18). As a researcher, what is your 'character' or position?

Mitchell: What is my relation to this voyeur in his raincoat? A big methodological question. In general terms, one needs an exploration of ways in which to write post-Orientalist studies of the Middle East, and a consideration of what that would involve. One response has been on the practical level, rather than the theoretical one, which is to try to publish work in Arabic as much as in English, and engage in debate with what is happening in Egypt and the rest of the Arab world. Again and again trying to step out of this position of the privileged outsider, that is one methodological strategy. But only one.

disClosure: Can you talk a little bit more about that one? It seems problematic to say you step *out* of the role of privileged outsider by *participating* in debate.

Mitchell: Right, I didn't say 'step outside' I said 'try to step outside'. I agree, there's no stepping outside, there's no complete getting outside one's role of privileged outsider. I think all one's doing in trying to enter into those kinds of debates is to acknowledge that, as a privileged outsider, you also have to be an insider in the sense that, what you say is something in which you engage with people there, and try to do that openly and constructively. I'm not under any illusion that thereby you're becoming an insider, just that you're trying to dismantle some of the Orientalist relationship.

I also feel that Middle East studies on an institutional level has to address issues like the enormous under-representation of scholars from the Middle East in the academy in the United States, and the weakness of intellectual ties between American universities and universities in the Middle East. These are much larger structural inequalities and we have to think about them and address them on that level. It's not only a problem with regard to the Middle East, but the problems are probably worse in Middle East studies than any other region of area studies. The scholars from the region, I suspect, are more under-represented in Middle East studies than those from any other region.

disClosure: REASON INCorporated

Another side of this issue is the situation in universities in the Arab world, many of which are in a very serious kind of crisis. The economic crisis in the region produces a university system that is severely under-funded and under-staffed, in most cases making it difficult or impossible for serious kinds of teaching and research to go on. This is worsened by the effects of Gulf money on that system. Over the last two decades anyone who wanted any hope of earning a decent living had to go to the Gulf to work in the universities there for a period of years, teaching in more comfortable surroundings and earning in a year what they might earn over a decade back home in Egypt or Syria or wherever.

But in most universities in the Gulf (with the exception of Kuwait) research was simply not a part of what was going on, and the political climate was even more repressive than in Cairo or Damascus. Then, on top of that, when they get back to Cairo, or wherever, they find themselves in a climate that continues to be intellectually repressive and in which it is very difficult to publish things that are seriously critical of the regime or seriously critical of certain kinds of political developments. Many academic specialists on the Middle East working in America proceed as if this wasn't a problem, or one that you could by-pass. They are interested in a Middle East "out there" which has no relationship to the problems facing academics there. The Middle East Studies Professional Association now has an academic freedom committee that publicizes and protests the arrest and torture of academics in the region. But these problems have to be addressed in a larger and more systematic way, and not just in individual cases.

Coming back to my own work and the methodological issues that you asked: like many people these days in post-colonial criticism, one of the things I try to do is show how Western categories have always from the beginning included and worked with what has been excluded as the non-West. That in itself is a sort of answer to the question—how do you deal with your relationship to the non-West and to non-Western subjects. It's in part by trying to show the problematic status of those very categories.

disClosure: Trying to break down that dualism?

Mitchell: Not in any sort of simple sense, like saying, that differences don't matter. 'Breaking down the dualism' is a phrase that gives the wrong impression. I would rather put it, by showing how the dualism has been necessary, and has had to be constructed, and asking how it has been constructed, and why capitalism, as a global phenomenon over the last 500 years, has required these kinds of dualisms of identity and dualisms of space. And trying to understand the kinds of displacements and disloca-

disClosure 5 (1996): REASON INCorporated

tions that take place in their construction. One is trying to destabilize the certainties and the truths of modernity.

disClosure: What do you mean by dislocations and destabilizing? One can examine the process of dualisms, the creation of authority and the subject, but to what extent is there the possibility for destabilizing? Is there an undercurrent? Where and how do you see that?

Mitchell: When I use the word 'destabilizing' I am not using it in the sense of some resistance or revolutionary potential that is going to shake the whole structure necessarily. I am more interested in the ways in which the structure itself, from the beginning is always incomplete and always built upon instabilities.

disClosure: If there are all these instabilities, what's their source?

Mitchell: One of the things to come out of some of the best work in post-colonial theory is the attempt to understand the incomplete: the dependence of modernity or capitalism as a global project from the beginning on its others, on what is portrayed as its others, its outside. There is always an incompleteness in its hegemonies over those others, and there are efforts to construct itself in terms of its others, in terms of its outsides, which are never actually outside. There are always ways in which the West gets contaminated by the other. The simple dichotomies that it wants to set up are never quite established in the ways it wants. This is something that people like Homi Bhabha and a number of those working in South Asian studies have explored in fruitful ways. This is the point that I too was making in my article on "Everyday Metaphors of Power"⁷ criticizing the literature on "everyday resistance." There is no original space that has not yet been overtaken by modernity or capitalism, which can be celebrated or even organized as a site of resistance. Rather, one looks for the kinds of incompletenesses that I was addressing just now—the ways in which, because of the inability ultimately to create the simple dualism and the insides and the outsides that it desires, modernism is always weakened and slipping. Many of my essays are attempts to explore some of those slippages in a variety of ways.

⁷1990. *Theory and Society*. 19:545-77.

My article on USAID, the least theoretical sort of article,⁸ is about the failure of capitalism and the project of modernity. But it's not an account of failure that is written in the terms of development discourse, the implications of which would be to try one more development program. It's about the very impossibility of the kind of knowledge and technique and planning to which development as a discourse, as a practice, aspires. Development is predicated upon distinctions that do not remain distinct and upon an impossible exteriority of development discourse to the politics that it is attempting to prescribe.

Postmodern problems

disClosure: Can I ask you to relate your critique of these modern forms of power to postmodernity and the condition of late capitalism? Your critique of modern forms of power has exposed the dualistic framework through which power appears to take on an existence apart from everyday practice in the form of state structures and ideological frameworks. Your approach is critical of others that perpetuate binary distinctions between the real and the conceptual, reality and meaning, and signifier and signified. Frederick Jameson's (1984)⁹ theory of postmodernity and the logic of late capitalism is built upon a number of dualisms, particularly the breakdown of the signifying chain of direct material associations between signifier and signified. This breakdown, in which connections between meaning and material become fragmented as a result of the extreme commodity fetishism of late capitalism, seems to represent an extreme manifestation of your notion of "the world as exhibition" in which "the machinery of commerce becomes a means of creating an effect of reality, indistinguishable from that of the exhibition" (*Colonising Egypt*, p.11). There are two ways of looking at this. One would be that Jameson is just describing a very late version of something that you see at work. And the other would be to say that he's reinscribing what you are trying to critique.

Mitchell: Jameson defines the contemporary era of postmodernism or late capitalism as the age of the simulacrum, in which the real has been transformed into so many pseudo-events. Yet as I showed in *Colonising Egypt*, the simulacrum and the pseudo-

⁸1991. "America's Egypt: Discourse of the Development Industry." *Middle East Report*. 169:18-36. Expanded version in *Power of Development*, ed. Jonathan Crush (New York:Routledge 1995).

⁹Jameson, Frederick. 1984. "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism" *New Left Review*. 146:53-93, reprinted in *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992) pp.1-54.

event were characteristic features of capitalism in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The world exhibitions and museums, the department stores and the tourist industry, urban planning and compulsory schooling, all the novel institutional forms of late nineteenth-century Paris and London, or Cairo and Istanbul, were organized around the simulation and re-presentation of the real. Representation—the dominant cultural technique of global capitalism and the form of the commodity itself—is always a pseudo-event, it is never something real.

What follows, as I argued in *Colonising Egypt*, is that what we mean by the "real" is always the product of a system of representation. To suggest that the real has been turned into a series of pseudo-events is to claim that there was once something real that was not already represented. This is exactly the fiction of an original reality, unmediated by the process of creating meaning, of creating exchange-value (which is a form of meaning or representation), that modern capitalism creates.

Jameson might respond that although one can find the traces of the postmodern or the age of the simulacrum in an earlier stage of capitalism, it is only under late capitalism that commodification has penetrated so many corners of life, of the globe, and of that psyche, that it has become a universal phenomenon, rendering postmodernism the "cultural dominant." Yet this kind of response seems to me to repeat the problem, for it implies that commodification involves taking activities, objects, or spaces that already existed and turning them into commodities. Once again, the argument implies the existence of a reality, a world of nature or of natural, pre-capitalist spaces and objects, that lies outside capitalism's system or representation and value. Commodification is not the turning of nature into commodities, or use-values into exchange-values. It is the conjuring-up of a system of meanings and values that present themselves as mere representations of real objects and real places; hence it is the creation of this lost reality.

What then is late capitalism, or postmodernism, if it is not the extensive commodification of previously "real" objects and spaces? Perhaps we should understand it instead as the process of commodification taken to such an extent that the effect of the real, of the untouched, of what exists before and outside the processes of representation and value-creation, begins to break down. Postmodernism is a crisis of representation (among other things), not because we lose touch with the real, but because the effect of the real begins to lose its effectiveness.

Let me relate this to the question of the idea of the economy, about which I talked at the beginning. Postmodernity has been used by Jameson and by David Harvey (in

The Condition of Postmodernity) and others, to refer to the period of global capitalism following the Fordist era—the period from the 1920's or 1930s to the late 1960s characterized by large-scale industrial-based production, extensive government and corporate planning, the incorporation of the advanced industrial working classes into a system of welfare and consumerism, and so on. This period was also, as I suggested earlier, the era of the "economy." The modern idea of the economy emerged only in the 1930s, but by the 1950s had become the self-evident object at the center of political discourse and state practice. In social and cultural theory, both Marxist and non-Marxist, and in broader intellectual debate, "the economy" became almost a synonym for the material, the really real. This is perhaps why the term remained, despite some important feminist, ecological, and other criticisms, perhaps the only major concept of twentieth-century social theory that was not destabilized by a rigorous theoretical critique—certainly if you compare it to concepts such as the state, the social, the nation, class, personhood, and so on.

This insulation from theoretical critique is all the more remarkable, because the post-1960s crisis of Fordism can also be seen as destabilizing the idea of the economy. The shift in the production of wealth away from manufacturing into what are still called "services," the term invented in the 1940s as a residual category but now said to account for about 75 percent of global GNP, has made it impossible to represent the actual size of the economy, in the confident way this was done in the Fordist era. The President of the American Economic Association remarked a couple of years ago that the proportion of the economy that economists could reliably measure had dropped to about 30 percent and was still falling. Services are still imagined as though they were countable objects that people produce out of other objects, by analogy with production in the manufacturing sector. In fact, of course, the term refers to the production not of material objects (not even manufacturing produces simple objects), but of systems of representations—entertainment, legal services, information, science, tourism, medicine, and so on. These cannot be accurately enumerated in any simple (or even complex) fashion, and cannot be fixed within a simple conception of the economy as a self-contained sphere. Similar problems in representing the economy are caused by the other major post-Fordist development, the globalization of manufacturing, services, and above all finance. This process too has made it increasingly impossible to measure the economy (the term always refers, unless otherwise specified, to the national economy) as a fixed and finite object.

The growing difficulty in representing the economy (and thus the increasing problem in making it the central concern of state policy) is one of the most important changes in political discourse of the post-Fordist period. But this change cannot be

understood as a breakdown in the ability to represent reality, or (in Jameson's language, borrowed from Kevin Lynch), to create cognitive maps of capitalism. Nor can it be seen as the replacement of that reality by simulacra or the pseudo-real. For the capitalist economy was always a construction, a system of representation—an object constructed out of professional economics, the broader discourse of social science, monetary policy, national frontiers, and numerous other interrelated discursive practices. What has happened is that the multiplication and intensification of the processes of representation (such as the growth of the service sector, as commodified representations are called, and the globalization of finance), has made it increasingly difficult to sustain the *effect* that economic discourse refers to a real, self-contained space that one can identify and map as the economy.

Selected Bibliography

- Mitchell, T. 1988. *Colonising Egypt*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- . 1990a. "The Invention and Reinvention of the Egyptian Peasant." *International Journal of Middle East Studies*. 22:129-50.
- . 1990b. "Everyday Metaphors of Power." *Theory and Society*. 19:545-77.
- . 1991a. "The Limits of the State: Beyond Statist Approaches and Their Critics." *American Political Science Review*. 85:77-96.
- . 1991b. "America's Egypt: Discourse of the Development Industry." *Middle East Review*. 169:18-36.
- . 1992. *Egypt in American Discourse*. Cyprus: 'Aybal Publishers. (in Arabic)

References Cited

- Africa Report. 1991. vol 36. no.2. March/April.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1979. "The Kabyle House or the World Reversed" in *Algeria 1960*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. pp.133-153.
- Critchfield, Richard. 1978. *Shahhat: An Egyptian*. Syracuse.
- Jameson, Frederick. 1984. "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism." *New Left Review*. 146:53-93.
- Said, Edward. 1978. *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon.