

Timothy Mitchell

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 recent 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.

Mitchell is the William B. Ransford Professor of Middle Eastern Studies in the Department of Middle Eastern, South Asian, and African Studies at Columbia University, and also teaches in the School of International and Public Affairs. Before joining Columbia in 2008 he taught for 25 years at New York University, where he served as Director of the Kevorkian Center for Near Eastern Studies. He was born and educated in England, earning his B.A. in Law (part 1) and History (part 2) from Queens' College, Cambridge University. He received his Ph.D. in Politics and Near Eastern Studies from Princeton University in 1984.

In 2026, he published a new book on capitalism, colonialism, and our relationship to the future, examining how we came to organise collective life on the principle of its impoverishment. We live in an age in which extraordinary wealth seems to arrive from unfathomable sources, as when tech firms that have never made a profit are valued at billions of dollars. While seeming extraordinary, this mode of acquiring unearned wealth, the book argues, is commonplace. It is a key to understanding how capitalism came into being and a clue to grasping why the catastrophe of climate collapse has come upon us. Published by Verso Press, the book is titled [*The Alibi of Capital: How We Broke the Earth to Steal the Future on the Promise of a Better Tomorrow*](#).

His first book, *Colonising Egypt* (1991), was a study of the emergence of modern modes of government in the colonial period and an exploration of the forms of reason, power and knowledge that define the experience of modernity. Translations of the book have appeared in several languages, including Arabic, German, Polish, Turkish, and Japanese.

Mitchell's subsequent work has covered a variety of topics in political theory and the contemporary material politics of the Middle East. He has published essays on the state and political power and other topics in political theory. Further writings on the nature of European modernity include an edited volume, *Questions of Modernity*, bringing together the work of scholars of both South Asia and the Middle East. In the field of Middle East politics he has published essays on agrarian transformation, economic reform, and the politics of development, mostly drawing on his research in Egypt. The research includes long-term fieldwork in a village in southern Egypt, which he has learned from and written about for more than three decades.

His 2002 book, *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, Modernity*, draws on his work in Egypt to examine the creation of economic knowledge and the making of “the economy” and “the market” as objects of twentieth-century politics; the wider role of expert knowledge in the formation of contemporary forms of government; the relationship between law, private property, and violence in this process; and the problems with explaining contemporary politics in terms of globalization or the development of capitalism.

Mitchell's research on the making of the economy led to a four-year project that he directed at the International Center for Advanced Study at NYU on The Authority Of Knowledge in a Global Age. Articles on “The Middle East in the Past and Future of Social Science,” “The Properties of Markets,” “Rethinking Economy,” and “The Work of Economics: How a Discipline Makes Its World,” explore these concerns, and developed Mitchell's interest in the broader field of science and technology studies (STS).

He brought together the fields of STS, political economy, and postcolonial theory in his book on *Carbon Democracy* (2012) which examines how the possibilities for democratic politics have been expanded or closed down in the construction of modern energy networks. Building on his work on the invention of the economy, the book also explores how knowledge of the economy, the earth, and its climate, and at the same time of the Middle East as a problem of "security," have been shaped and delimited in the production of the West's carbon-intensive modes of life.

In 2022-23 he was appointed as Distinguished Visiting Professor in the School of Social Science at the Institute for Advanced Study, in Princeton, New Jersey. He co-directed a collaborative project that year on “Climate Crisis Politics”.

Mitchell has served as Senior Editor of the journal *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* (CSSAAME), and on the editorial committees of the *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, the *American Political Science Review*, *Middle East Report* (where he served a term as chair of the editorial committee), *Social Text*, *Society and Space*, the *Journal of Historical Sociology*, *Economy and Society*, the *Journal of Cultural Economy*, and *Development and Change*. Several of his writings have been translated and published in Arabic, including three further books of essays, as well as in Persian, Hebrew, Turkish, Russian, Korean, Japanese, Chinese, and a number of European languages.