Grain of Sand Award (2023): Laudation for Timothy Mitchell

Drawing inspiration from the opening lines of William Blake's "Auguries of Innocence" and Wislawa Szymborska's "View with a Grain of Sand," the Grain of Sand Award honors a scholar whose contributions demonstrate creative and sustained engagement with questions of enduring political importance from an interpretive perspective. Echoing Szymborska's "We call it a grain of sand," the award underscores the centrality of meaning-making in both the constitution and study of the political; recalling Blake's "To see a world in a grain of sand," the award recognizes scholars who expand the capacity of interpretive scholarship to embody and inspire imaginative theorizing, while cultivating new lines of sight by enriching our literary and experiential resources and nourishing the playfulness of mind so necessary to the vitality of social science.

On behalf of the Interpretive Methods and Methodologies Section, I am proud to announce this year's winner, Professor Timothy Mitchell of Columbia University. Mitchell is the William B. Ransford Professor of Middle Eastern, South Asian, and African Studies. As a trail blazer in the fields of political science and postcolonial theory, Mitchell's widely cited research has explored 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 management and disciplining of collective life.

As one may also learn from his website: Mitchell was educated at Queens' College, Cambridge, where he received a first-class honors degree in History. He completed his PhD 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 offers courses on the history and politics of the Middle East, colonialism, and the politics of technical things.

Mitchell is the author of the pathbreaking book *Colonising Egypt* (University of California Press, 1991), in which he charted the emergence of modern modes of governance in Egypt's colonial period. An influential theoretical investigation into the forms of truth, reason, power, and knowledge that helped make modernity what it is, the book was also a methodological tour de force. Inspired in part by a Foucauldian approach to discourse analysis, Mitchell examined the felicitous conditions under which colonialism's specific "will to power" gained traction—and the kinds of work it accomplished refashioning subjects and reproducing the rule of Europeans abroad. The book was simultaneously an imaginative and sophisticated foray into the theory and methods associated with Bourdieu and with Derridean deconstruction. Mitchell's insights into the peculiar ways in which the colonial encounter required that colonized populations be put on display—made visible, exoticized, and sanitized for western consumption—opened vistas for fruitful new research and attunements in the study of both politics and history.

Perhaps best known in mainstream political science for his landmark 1991 *APSR* article, "The Limits of the State: Beyond Statist Approaches and Their Critics," Mitchell argued that the state's conceptual elusiveness offered clues about its nature. It was not enough to craft a better definition of the term or more clearly demarcate its boundaries with society. Mitchell admonished scholars to recognize that the very division between state and society was an effect of "complex power relations" that were historically traceable to "technical innovations in the social order, whereby methods of organization and control internal to the social processes

they govern create the effect of a state structure external to those processes." In the tradition of Marx accounting for the emergence of the binary between civil society and the state in "On The Jewish Question," for Mitchell, what he termed the state effect is the powerful fiction that the state is somehow external to the internal societal conditions that produced it.

Mitchell's subsequent book, *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, Modernity* (2002), is no ordinary compilation of accumulated writings destined to be consigned to the second-book dustbin of history. Drawing on his extensive fieldwork in Egypt, in this set of essays Mitchell produced another influential book, describing the creation of economic knowledge and the making of "the economy" and "the market" as objects of twentieth-century politics. This insightful collection continues Mitchell's pursuit of the role of expert knowledge in the formation of the contemporary state. He also maps the relationships among law, private property, and violence in this process; and he identifies the problems that come with explaining contemporary politics in terms of globalization or capitalist development.

Mitchell's growing interests in science and technology studies and his active engagement with Bruno Latour's work (already evident in dazzling and controversial essays such as "Can the Mosquito Speak?," from *Rule of Experts*) combined with his abiding concerns in political economy and postcolonial theory to generate his third book, *Carbon Democracy* (2012). Mitchell begins this time with a history of coal power, which, he maintains, is crucial to understanding how democracy emerged. As a source of energy, coal had many delivery chokepoints—making it susceptible to disruption in ways that empowered mass demands for democracy and limited the power of oligarchs. The appearance of cheap and

abundant energy from the more centralized delivery of oil, particularly from the Middle East, weakened the power of mass movements and returned leverage to autocrats.

More generally, *Carbon Democracy* invited us to think about what kind of conditions open up democratic practices and which ones foreclose them. Building on Mitchell's previous work on the invention and subsequent management of "the economy," the book was an early demonstration of how climate politics and preoccupations with security (particularly as related to the Middle East) shape and have been shaped by the needs of the West's "carbon-intensive modes of life." His methodological contributions here are exemplary, for he shows us how to write the history of concepts, how to foreground questions of materiality while imbricating them in discursive worlds and practices of knowledge production. He also teaches us anew how to conduct a politically engaged postcolonial reading of the ecological order, which is to say, deeply attentive to questions of nature, democracy, climate change, and the potential for collective catastrophe augured by our ongoing reliance on fossil fuels.