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RESEARCH PAPER

# Lila Abu-Lughod's Contribution to the Feminist Debate in the Arab World

Ayyad al-Batniji | June 2014

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\* This paper has been translated from its original Arabic.

## Abstract

This paper is based on the conclusions reached by ethnographer and professor of anthropology Lila Abu-Lughod following her fieldwork with Bedouin women in Upper Egypt, and elucidates her contributions to the ongoing controversy within gender studies on the discrepancies found between predominant feminist discourses on women's rights and the complex contextual realities that shape women's lives. Abu-Lughod's critique of the inadequacy of Western legal and development narratives to comprehend challenges faced by Arab women reveals how these discourses actually work to the detriment of Arab women. The paper then attempts to apply Abu Lughod's findings to the wider conceptualization of the Arab state in terms of its governance and social practices. Finally, the paper seeks to link these deductions to the contemporary debate in political and legal theory on the concept of the modern state, within the framework of international literature on the subject.

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## A Break from Dominant Feminist Discourse

Lila Abu-Lughod's critique on feminist discourse represents a break from the predominant narrative on women in the Arab and Muslim World. Her criticism of the legal language shaping discourses on women's rights as a language that "sequesters culture, neglects history and politics, and contributes to the 'individuation' of the Third World,"<sup>2</sup> calls for the need to formulate a new discourse that does justice to Arab and Muslim women and takes into account the local context and inherent complexities within that.

Based on her work conducted with Bedouin women in Egypt's Western Desert, Abu-Lughod notes how emerging feminist discourse on Muslim women does not resonate with her experience in the field.<sup>3</sup> She also points to the dangers inherent in using legal frameworks as a benchmark for emancipation not only within the context of women, but also with regards to Arab society as a whole. Such discourse, she notes, contributes to reproducing negative stereotyping of Arab society, creating a colonial dependency under the guise of freedom and the liberation of women. Abu-Lughod further argues that such a legal framework, typically centered on the right to assets and property and on the freedom to work as the key to emancipation, applicable to both rural and urban women alike, represents a flawed approach that fails to adequately reflect the multiple and complex contexts that frame the lives of women, be they cultural, political, religious, or economic.

Abu-Lughod gives an example of one of her anthropological studies conducted in a village in Upper Egypt, where she observed that the challenges confronted by women did not lie in the lack of educational opportunities, as typically propagated by local and international NGOs, but more in the high cost and poor quality of education, which presents a hindrance to both girls and boys. The deterioration of the quality of public education, she argues, is not down to gender inequality, but the neo-liberal approach that became dominant in recent years and undermines the role of the state and the provision of social welfare and services. If anything, Abu-Lughod found Egyptian young

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<sup>2</sup> 1948 Arabs, "Lila Abu-Lughod at Mada al-Carmel: 'Reliance on legal discourse and the women's rights discourse may harm women'," (in Arabic) *Arab 48*, January 28, 2011, <http://www.arabs48.com/?mod=articles&ID=77713>.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

rural women to have shown remarkable perseverance in continuing their education, and noted the sacrifices their families made toward that end.<sup>4</sup>

The narrow definition of what constitutes employment is also found to be problematic, and the liberal human rights' discourse limits its notion of work to wage labor, which fails to cover all dimensions constituting work. It is also a concept that is not related to values, and represents a truncated conception that reduces work exclusively to the Western liberal notion. Furthermore, it does not correspond to the evolution in the concept of work on the global level, with many in the United States still skeptical on whether gainful employment actually represents the ultimate solution. This calls for the need to formulate different definitions of work that adequately measure the economic contribution of women. Abu-Lughod says: "if childcare is not provided, is it economically viable? If work is badly paid, back breaking, exploitative, or boring, is the absence of women's labor at home and the vulnerability to harassment worth it?"<sup>5</sup>

Defining women's emancipation in common narratives on women's rights is women's independence from the family, or what could be called "the process of individuation," which grants women a distinct and independent identity from the family as a pre-condition to becoming an autonomous person, legally and otherwise. This constitutes the centerpiece of the human rights' and development discourse, grossly misrepresenting the reality of women; within this discourse, the strength of the family bonds are said to hinder the situation of women and constitute a hurdle to their emancipation. Such thinking constitutes a condemnation of the family and of the systems of kinship and clans; Arab families are thus seen as enshrining masculine hegemony at the expense of women's independence.

Even more misleading is the fact that development reports attribute women's poor status to factors such as Islam, while neglecting more probable factors related to colonialism, industrial capitalism, and the effects of state-building projects. Abu-Lughod makes us question: do family bonds genuinely constitute a problem for women? Why is the economic necessity of the common family often overlooked? Why is the reality of family economics, including contributions from multiple family members to support the

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<sup>4</sup> Abu-Lughod, "Dialects of Women's Empowerment".

<sup>5</sup> Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, "Abu-Lughod Counters Stereotypes of Arab Women," Feature Stories Archive, <http://ccas.georgetown.edu/story/1242691340168.html>.

household, ignored? Why is the possibility that families are, for better or worse, the structure through which individuals perceive themselves and constitute themselves as individuals discounted? What if the autonomy of women constitutes a backlash since it is yet to be proven that such autonomy would automatically grant women equality?<sup>6</sup>

Abu-Lughod argues that women are able to create their own forms of resistance against subjugation, which shows that they are capable of defending themselves by improvising methods of resistance without the need of external interferences.<sup>7</sup> Resistance in this case is the result of the specific contexts related to local structures and to the nature of power relations within it. The ability of women to resist negates the need to call for an external intervention.

To extend Abu Lughod's arguments, one must ask a multitude of questions: if women were accepting of the existing family structure, not viewing it as an encroachment on them, would this imposition represent an infringement of their own rights and choices? Would it warrant an intervention in order to emancipate and guide women, with the help of the state, through top-down development projects that do not take into account the local context? Would this not represent a channel for the use of violence by the state, since its actions are rational and purposeful, to use the language of Max Weber?

The development and modernizing discourse, if based on Weber's notion of rationalization, is embodied in the concept of the state. Each resistance to these measures, such as the practices of the state, then becomes an expression of ignorance and the demonstration of a lack of awareness by the resisting party. This thinking underlined the demarche of the modernizing state in the Arab world, which deemed peasants resisting its modernizing practices as ignorant. The development of the Arab world required the normalization of these peasants and the instigation of a deep sense of unity with the national government, alongside a strong belief that the institutions and the higher political values of the state are just and adequate. Failing that, these individuals would need to be eliminated or silenced in order to impose the rational system desired by the state.

Abu-Lughod's arguments challenge the international demarche of the Western development discourse, often promoted as a one size fits all global model to follow. In

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<sup>6</sup> Abu-Lughod, "Dialects of Women's Empowerment".

<sup>7</sup> Abu-Lughod, "The Romance of Resistance," pp. 41-55.

contrast, Abu-Lughod, maintains that this globalized conception of the liberal development discourse works to the detriment of women, justifying their right to reject being integrated into globalism and defend their cultural and local specificity.

## A Critique of the Modern State

Abu-Lughod's analysis goes beyond the role of women and has wider implications that relate to the entirety of Arab society. Therefore, how can an analysis of gender issues change our understanding of the contemporary social world, its representation, and the manner through which we should understand social worlds?<sup>8</sup> To gain a deeper understanding, we must analyze what Abu-Lughod's findings say about the path of modern state building in the Arab world. Her analysis leads to a reconsideration of the mechanisms of the state and its relationship with civil society and local communities. The impetus for this reconsideration is that all the "keys" to "emancipation" that were discussed by Abu-Lughod, such as law, individuation, and wage labor, constitute the basis of the modern state in the West, and should be implanted in the Arab context. Her findings, however, point to the fact that these "keys" can prove harmful not only to women, but also to men and the structure of the Arab family, deductions that in turn have implications on building the modern Arab state.

Abu-Lughod challenges the very notion of the state, one that is based on a capitalist conception of work (wage labor) and relies both on legal texts as the normative framework organizing the individual's relationship with state and society, and on individuation, which insulates the state from any collective bonds—sectarian, religious, or racial—as social intermediaries that prevent a direct link between the individual and the state. Abu-Lughod's ideas also question this process of "individuation" that has enabled the modern state to dominate society, a process expounded on by both Tocqueville and Durkheim, who argue that once society is atomized, nothing is capable of threatening the autonomy of the state".<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, the collective identitarian logic remains supreme in the structure of Arab societies, which feed on local identity and contradict the state as a collective affiliation that assures public order and as an institution of human organization in modern society.

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<sup>8</sup> Abu-Lughod, "The Domains of Theory," p. 73.

<sup>9</sup> Badie and Birnbaum, *The Sociology of the State*, p. 1.



From Abu-Lughod's perspective, if wage labor has the potential to hinder the status of women, and fails to represent a universally-valid economic standard, and if reliance on legal frameworks strips one of their culture and neglects history and politics, and if the individual autonomy of women from the family can have adverse effects on women, and if all these factors work to the detriment of the status of women, then such deductions must surely also apply to the project of state building.

## Non-Governmental Organizations: Their Complicity in "Individuating" the Third World

The focus on the development and legal discourse thus contributes to the "individuation" of communities in the Third World. This issue needs to be theoretically explored, for its neglect can have serious implications. The popular narrative on the Arab and Muslim world is that it represents an "exception" to the global demarche, or that it lies "outside history". The normative standard that led to this conclusion results from Western standards that view their own model as the exemplary civilizational model to follow. When rights' organizations active in the field of development adopt these standards, and fail to consider local contexts and intricacies, they contribute to the edification of this state of exception; that is, they partake in an "individuating" of the Third World that is typically viewed as existing outside history. When beneficiaries do not conform to imported legal and developmental standards, it is the Arab individual that is then labeled as backward and a burden to civilization, prompting intervention that is able to extract him or her from the throes of backwardness in which he or she resides. This is, of course, a call for the colonization of the Arab under the headings of rationalization and the transmission of civilization.

Human rights' and development organizations active in the Arab and Muslim world need to rethink their model and formula on backwardness to progress. They also must critically assess their own contribution—conscious or otherwise—to "individuating" society by painting it as existing outside of history, and the dangerous implications inherent in such endeavor. Development organizations must also examine their "unconscious collusion," "unconscious" here assuming the organizations good intentions, with practices reminiscent of Western colonial intervention. Within this, they have the duty to expose the local reality, and make it clear in their local and international reports that dominant international standards are not fit for all societies. Failing to do so would enable those awaiting the opportunity to intervene for their own

exploitative and colonialist ends, making development organizations complicit with Western colonial incursions.

Even before this stage, there is a need for rights and development organizations to examine their own notion of the social actor in accordance with the local context. Implicit in this is the need to question and reassess their specific field of action, and level of awareness, on the issues they are tackling, their political, social, and cultural leanings, their social class and ideological background, their developmental approaches, the reality of the problems that face their work, and the manner in which they perceive these local problems.

Such a reassessment is crucial to examine the relationship between these variables and the ability, or inability, of a highly educated elite, including NGO professionals and human rights' experts, to be critically aware of themselves and instill standards that reflect the contextual complexity referred to by Abu-Lughod. Her critique on the need for a transitional discourse on gender equality, and the incompatibility between reality and the discourse on rights, points to potential rethinking of rights' and developmental organizations. Likewise, such critique could be applicable to the state-building project in the Arab world in a manner that respects women and local communities apart from the language of neo-liberalism and the modernization theory that dominated in the Third World, following the motto: "seeing like a state".<sup>10</sup> James Scott's book title *Seeing Like a State* is an excellent formulation of the relationship between state and society, and perfectly applicable to the building of the modern state in the Arab world.

## International Revision of the Modern State

Lila Abu-Lughod did not write on the modern state; instead, her work focused on the subject of authority and resistance through anthropological fieldwork on Bedouin women in Egypt.<sup>11</sup> Abu-Lughod departs from the idea that the study of local and minor forms of resistance—resistance here viewed as a personification of power—affects one's perspective on authority.<sup>12</sup> In this analytical framework, Abu-Lughod's contribution to the logic of the state is not dissimilar from those of Michel Foucault, James Scott, and

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<sup>10</sup> Scott, *Seeing Like a State*.

<sup>11</sup> Abu-Lughod, "The Domains of Theory".

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., pp. 40-41.

Giorgio Agamben, all of whom read the experience of the modern state differently than traditional discourses of modernity, which typically associate modernity with freedom, progress, and rationality. Contemporary literature is attempting to deconstruct traditional perceptions on modernity, and is influenced by the methodological advances in the formative domain of the state in capitalist societies, consisting of the totalizing presence of the state within the social body, the state's methods of operation, its power in constituting the modern social self, and its colonial character. Such thinking goes against the political mentality that emerged from the revolutionary tradition of modernity, where a formula for rule was presented and based on negotiations between the rulers and the ruled. This formula entailed the idea of mutual commitment: the governed self commits to obedience in exchange for the responsibility of the ruler who is not, according to the modern political formulation, a person, but rather an idea based on abstract normative principles that are rationally formulated and that shape the relationship between the two sides. This makes the ruler (the state) into an organism with a social responsibility and, ultimately, a social mind. This formula was thought to achieve the main objectives of modernity: progress, rationality, and freedom.

In contrast, contemporary political writing, specifically the post-modernist current, represents a break from political literature, particularly in that modernity is not necessarily a process toward freedom but one that seeks to monitor and discipline the individual.<sup>13</sup> Through new research on the genealogy of the modern state, it becomes clear that the formation of the social subject was never free from relations of power; coercion was the mechanism that shaped the modern social self, which is at odds with the discourse of modernity that deems a subject free to constitute and realize itself outside relations of compulsion, and claims that it has allowed man to practice his self-fulfillment and freedom through his autonomous employment of reason. Western genealogical studies—especially Michel Foucault's theorizations on bio-politics, governance, and disciplinary mechanisms, as well as his notion of authority as power in which he denies the notion of an independent legal system—thereby undermining the concept of a "state of law" or a state independent from violence—lead to a rethinking of the modernist political premise. Equally compelling is Barrington Moore's contributions on the origins of dictatorship and democracy, his thoughts on the peasant revolutions in the Third World, his elucidation of the cost paid by humans on the path to modernity, his questions on violence and the extent of its necessity for freedom, and his view of

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<sup>13</sup> Foucault, *"Society Must be Defended"*. And Lemke, "Marx without Quotation-Marks," pp. 13-26.

how the lower classes paid a heavy cost for progress during the emergence of the democratic liberal system.<sup>14</sup> Giorgio Agamben's writings offer another perspective, and discuss the incompatibility between modern political and legal thought and a shared free will, which reverses the classical Greek formula regarding the compatibility between being and action. Finally, James Scott offers his position on the resistance of the weak. Scott's studies and works have focused on the different means used by the citizens in resisting the hegemony of the state, in addition to his findings on the origins of the modern state, which he claims invades all the spheres of action and thought in which the individual operates.

Abu-Lughod's findings, while not directly situated within this literature, reveal the essence of the logic that guides such writings, which form part of a larger revision of the global evolution of concepts believed to be suitable for all societies, even those that are not part of the modern West. These revisions undermine the globalist and totalizing discourse, placing modern political imageries in a contradiction between "being as a potentiality" and "being in fact". Abu-Lughod, for instance, is critical of reforms in the Third World that are based on legal discourse, UN rhetoric, or globalist claims that are based on a universal discourse that clashes with local contexts.<sup>15</sup> Standing against the claims of the applicability of cultural, political, and legal universalism, Abu-Lughod calls for a deeper understanding of the current and historic conditions of women.<sup>16</sup>

## The Failure of the Modern State

Abu-Lughod, like James Scott, advocates local language against "imposed," interventionist, and disciplined language that manifests itself as a static "scientific" language blanketing local contexts. Within this, Abu-Lughod expresses surprise at the lack of anti-colonial discourse in the region, as well as the lack of intervention by local voices against such projects of imposition in order to question, challenge, and undermine them.<sup>17</sup> She argues that the best approach is one that can respect and take

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<sup>14</sup> Moore, *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*.

<sup>15</sup> "Mada al-Carmel hosts Professor Lila Abu-Lughod," *Bokra*, January 17, 2011, <http://goo.gl/w0Z050>.

<sup>16</sup> 1948 Arabs, "Abu Lughod at Mada al-Carmel".

<sup>17</sup> Abu-Lughod, "The Domains of Theory," p. 73.

into account specificities, while at the same time being connected to ongoing theorizations occurring in other parts of the world.<sup>18</sup>

Social practices also tend to reveal dynamics that have an impact on the perception of the state and the logic of its action as a planning authority. Arab theorizations in this domain tend to begin from traditional Western thinking rather than from contemporary Western theorizations on the state. Linking the local to the global should, in this context, strive toward the compatibility between existence "in fact" and existence as a concept; the latter must mirror the former, or the totality that is imposed on collectivities becomes a coercive, violent, one, and a form of generalized slavery. Abu-Lughod's deductions mirror intellectual explorations relating to the domains of authority, power, and resistance. A review of literature that links local perspective to a wider theoretical context is thus fitting.

James Scott explains explores the reasons behind the failure of state projects that aim to improve the lives of people.<sup>19</sup> Central governments, he argues, impose specific policies upon their societies, and in order to make these policies clearer and easier to read by the government, the state seeks to suppress the local knowledge of societies in favor of an imposed scientific, technical, and regulated language that allows the state to tighten its control over society. Scott is critical of the top-down social planning, and explicates the negative repercussions of the belief that planning cities, the economy, and society as a whole is possible through an elevated center that imposes its planning visions on the people, without taking into account the practical language used by these populations. He further argues that the success of social planning schemes is dependent on the admission that the local practical knowledge is not less important than official knowledge.

In doing so, Scott constructs his argument against "development theory" and the imperialist state planning that neglects values, desires, local vernaculars, and the protests of the subjects. He puts forth four "deadly" factors that he believes to be the cause of all disasters that are borne out of the planning of central governments, and lead to the tragedies witnessed throughout the history of social engineering. Underlining these historical disasters are: the state's organization of society and nature

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 69.

<sup>19</sup> Scott, *Seeing Like a State*.

from an administrative, technical, and executive perspective, which led to the creation of the imagery of the modern despotic ruler; the domination of the ideology of “high modernity,” which places its faith in the ability of science to improve all aspects of human life; the readiness to employ the (despotic) central authority to induce large-scale interventions; and the existence of a despotic regime that does not balk at using repressive methods in order to spread its top-down designs, along with a subjugated and weak civil society that lacks the ability to mount an effective resistance against such plans.

The notion that the state is *the* rational entity, while society is an entity that is not self-aware and needs to be recast from above (the state), needs to be challenged. This is ultimately what constituted the basis of the modernizing state in the Arab, Turkish, and Iranian contexts, inspired from Max Weber’s notion of rationality. The bureaucratic apparatus of the state believes that it knows how societies work better than the average citizens through the use of a regulated scientific language instead of the “mushy” local vernacular that is difficult to discipline. Scott argues that the local practical knowledge found among the masses is the brand of knowledge that was neglected by modern governments when they attempted to resettle peasants in new villages. It is the knowledge that the urban planning experts lack when they attempt to rebuild cities on the basis of simple and totalistic designs. The state creates a society that “sees like a state,” or what Scott dubs “high modernity”. It is an attempt by the authorities to reshape society, making it compatible with scientific laws; agricultural, industrial, and urban planning does not emanate from the practical knowledge held by the members of society, but through the scientific knowledge that is imposed by the state and its experts, putting forth the belief that production, itself, must take place according to a plan, imposing a need to reshape the entirety of society in accordance with a rational plan. The scientific knowledge of the state also believes that a genuine modern society is qualitatively different from anything that is traditional or arbitrary. The “etatization” of social life, the absorption of the entirety of social life into the state, which imposes its heavy-handed sovereignty over society and bureaucratizes all aspects of life, leads to the shrinking of social life because the state has “bureaucratized” human existence, to use the words of Jose Ortega Y Gasset.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Gasset, *The Revolt of the Masses*, p. 125.

Against the unitary language that is imposed by the state upon society, and which Scott views as the reason for the failure of statist projects, Abu-Lughod defends the existence of multiple languages. Through her anthropological works, she defends "the existence of multiple ideologies that constitute the structure of personal experiences and are used by individuals to assert a variety of claims".<sup>21</sup> Abu-Lughod's research points to the ability of women to reproduce the structures of domination due to their commitment to dominant moral codes, as well as their ability to resist this moral authority.<sup>22</sup> All this makes women active in their social world, which disproves the myth of passive and subjugated women, prevalent in all narratives on Arab women. To the contrary, Abu-Lughod explains women's ability to design strategies for maneuvering around social authority and acquire influence and practice resistance. Many women have also shown how "gender segregation creates an even more important sphere for action in daily life than what is permitted to women in societies with less segregation between the genders".<sup>23</sup>

Abu-Lughod's contribution is important in that it shows the ability of the social field to regulate itself—while there is an authority imposed on women, women are also able to resist from within the moral system of the social domain. This challenges two notions: firstly, it belies the narrative of the passive subjugation of women, while asserting their ability for action. Secondly, it denies the need for an external intervention, either by Western colonialism or by the despotic modern state, under the guise of the defense of the rights of women (the use of the argument of the lack of women's rights as a justification for military intervention), as the United States did in Afghanistan under the pretext of liberating Afghan women. Abu-Lughod's arguments also echo anthropologist Ruth Benedict's theory of "holistic culture," which claims that the general behavior found in any culture can be better understood in light of the values and the general trends that exist within the said culture, and that a number of specific regulations govern the reactions of individuals in each culture; these regulations necessarily differ from one society to another. Therefore, the study of the behavior of individuals and groups must take place in light of what these individuals and collectivities believe to be right and wrong, and in light of their notion on the permissible and impermissible

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<sup>21</sup> Abu-Lughod, "The Domains of Theory," p. 72.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p.72.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p.70.

behavior.<sup>24</sup> The theory argues that each culture is dominated by broad holistic trends that grant it a specific character distinguishing it from other cultures, and that this necessitates studying the basic trends within the culture rather than focusing on what should be imposed from outside the culture in question. This theory also resonates with Pierre Bourdieu's theory on the habitus and the mechanisms that not only assure the stability and continuity of a specific field, but also hold that integration into a field can only take place by respecting and following the general rules that it formulated for itself. Rules that regulate action represent a structure that precedes the actors themselves since they constitute an integrative structure. This, in turn, produces a modality of self-discipline that contributes to the reproduction of the field in question, and amasses and enshrines general traditions. In his pivotal work *Practical Reason: On the Theory of Action*, Pierre Bourdieu exclaims:

Since the potentialities that are constantly taught through objective conditions [...] engender ambitions and practices that objectively conform with these objective conditions and are pre-adapted, to an extent, to their objective requirements, the least of incidents becomes an excluded possibility [...] either as an "unthinkable" possibility or due to a double negation that attempts to make necessity into virtue, i.e. rejecting the rejected and admiring the inevitable.<sup>25</sup>

Thus, the rules of the field command individuals without an external authoritative intervention that imposes specific commitments upon the actors; the field itself imposes rules that cannot be contravened by the actors. As such, any external intervention must enter into a conflict and a contradiction with the structure of the local field. Within this context, would all this not then imply that the rights' and developmental discourse, representing a foreign imported language from outside the field, constitute a contradiction with the local language of the social domain? What is the usefulness of imposing such a language as long as the field is capable of regulating itself and of adapting organically to its existential requirements? As long as the field is capable of supplying actors with the ability to speak and resist and adapt, the coercive and violent external intervention, which does not take into account the logic and the rules of the field, becomes unproductive and superfluous.

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<sup>24</sup> Awda, *Adaptation and Resistance*, p. 4.

<sup>25</sup> Cote and Monier, *Elements for a Political Sociology*, p. 29.



## Timothy Mitchell and the Truth on Modern Authority

Timothy Mitchell's contribution to the subject in question exposes the reality of the modern state and the logic of its operation as a planning agency. In his book, *Colonizing Egypt*,<sup>26</sup> Mitchell describes and interprets the appearance of the modern political order in colonial Egypt. This model was centered on a single authoritative self that views the world as imagery or as an abstract structure of representation, which endows it with meaning and provides it with political certitude. This imagery shapes the consciousness toward the modern authority as a rational actor, which makes any contestation of this authority appear as the negation of rationality; any act of resistance against the authority is viewed as an irrational act that must be punished. Acts of resistance are, then, presented as devoid of consciousness and as emanating from the field of political irrationality, which prefaces the uprooting of such tendencies.

Thus, Mitchell shows how the sphere of the modern authority came to subjugate the social world; individuals were now directed by the actions of the state, transforming authority from an intermittent one to a perpetual power that is ever-present in the social body, which was achieved through the separation of words from objects. The symbolic language emerged with the transition to modernity, making meaning separate from objects, which permits invisible control in a demonstration of the effectiveness of the modes of control. The notion of representation, where physical contexts appear as separate from abstract concepts, is what grants the authority a continuous presence, with the image or the structure becoming a standard for measuring objects and practices.

The term "programming" best exemplifies Mitchell's view on how authority and control operate in the modern society, a term that Mitchell borrowed from computer programming language and applied to the modern political field. Programming informs and directs the work of the computer; it is a language composed of a number of symbols and rules that direct the operations of the computer according to the programming language, each of which suits a specific type of daily functions that need to be regulated and controlled in accordance with specific practical needs. The modern state, for Mitchell, can be viewed as a grouping of rules and symbols that are internalized by the individual (i.e., a structure of representation that determines the

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<sup>26</sup> Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt*.

permissible and impermissible actions). Through internalization, external authority becomes internalist, operating through an internal authority that relies on the desire to obey: a productive internal authority. From Mitchell's perspective, the state can be seen as a group of rules and symbols that seek to direct social processes, control them, shape them, and reshape them.

In *Rule of Experts*, Mitchell presents a different conception in which the world appears devoid of a thinking self that is endowed with awareness and purposefulness that precede practices. A world that cannot be controlled, muted, or categorized, a world that is hybrid, interconnected, and entangled. There is no "self" that acts from an authentic historical location; consciousness is created through practices that impose their own logic. In *Rule of Experts*, there is no self-sufficient identity, but, instead, a number of broken identities. It is an open-ended world, without straight lines or a pre-designed plan. Action cannot be traced back to reason or matter alone; calculations and classifications require putting a limit to social processes and defining them in a definitive manner as if they were complete and final. Additionally, the complexities, elements, and dimensions of social life must be estimated so that they can be measured. This is an impossible level of effectiveness, and adopting such a demarche necessitates the neglect of social complexities because it is impossible for humans to establish full control over social factors.

Undermining the entire Western metaphysical model, he claims that human action does not appear as the embodiment of reason, which observes, calculates, and reorganizes its world. What is taking place is merely a process of displacement and recasting. This requires the denial of the self, making the demarche appear to be taking place without a self that is aware, because it shapes itself through what Mitchell calls "processes of displacement and recasting". The end result is in the dynamics that are formed during the displacement and the recasting, during the process of unconscious interaction, because events do not evolve based on a movement from a specific historical position, or because of an intentional and conscious will, but are the result of the balances produced by the social interactions. The end result is not a faithful replication of the original programming (i.e., the consciousness that precedes the interaction between abstracts and objects). This is a clear indication that, for Mitchell, "history is the revelation of an unsituated logic" and the expression of an infinite evolving sequence. In short, he presents history as the revelation of a logic that has no location, exhibiting itself as an infinite sequence.

The significance of *Colonizing Egypt* in this context is that it speaks in accordance with an imposed, interventionist language that shapes the social world and is represented by a higher political self (the modern authority), in contrast with a subject that is affiliated with this authority: the passive society on the receiving end of the actions of power. In *Colonizing Egypt*, Mitchell focuses on the dimension of representation, the structure, the framework, and the form, or the metaphysical dimension that endows practices with meaning, more than he focused on the practices themselves. This form is what regulates relations between the different organs of the control system and the structure of societal relations, enabling and crystallizing them, while also determining the principles that direct and reproduce them, and fixing their relationship with the political, economic, and cultural domains. This modality also pertains to the shape of the geographic domain and its different uses, patterns of behavior, actions and reactions, and political designs. Mitchell treats what he calls "the gap in Foucault's work," which focused on the disciplinary authorities and their objective nature (i.e., the micro-level), while neglecting the larger planes, as well as the interaction and intermixing between the two levels.

In *Rule of Experts*, on the other hand, the world is hybrid, entangled, with no final demarcations separating authority from resistance, violence from law, the state from the exception, and the holistic from conjuncture. In terms of their theoretical representation of authority as a relationship, and not as a separate, essential, or higher entity, Mitchell is in agreement with Abu-Lughod. Both authors also view resistance as a personalization, or effect, of authority in the sense that there is an intermingled relationship between authority and resistance.<sup>27</sup>

What matters in this regard is the relationship between this representation and the debate at hand: the relationship between authority, resistance, and women in the Arab world according to Abu-Lughod's work. The significance here lies in that each authority produces a resistance that suits it in accordance with this theoretical representation. While this conclusion can have more than one meaning, the positive sense of this theoretical representation deems that women are ultimately capable of producing

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<sup>27</sup> This theoretical representation of the relationship between authority and resistance can have dangerous repercussions, especially if applied to Palestinian society, which is still confronting the Israeli settler colonial movement. There is, however, value in this theoretical representation since it can be very effective in interpreting power relations. In a forthcoming paper, I discuss this theoretical representation in terms of its lacunas, usefulness, and application in the Palestinian colonial context.

patterns of resistance compatible with the authority that is imposed on them in accordance with the pattern of power relations and the ethical system that frames both female and male actors. This reality denies the need for an external intervention that, in effect, disrupts the power-relation pattern because it comes from outside the field, which places it in a confrontation with the “character” of the field and its inherent potentialities. This intervention is devoid of the language that dominates the field, and serves as the source of incompatibility between the local and the external.

This reality denies the need for an external intervention that, in effect, disrupts the power-relation pattern because it comes from the outside and is devoid of local language and context. What is more, such interventions actually take away from women’s agency and hinder their power, as demonstrated by Abu-Lughod’s in her field research: women are socially active and capable of manifold forms of resistance. This thesis places the legal discourse seeking to “liberate women” in a bind; it shows the weakness of the arguments employed by the “women liberation” discourse, and exposes the misleading claim that the objective behind intervention is the liberation of women, while, in reality, these actions engender harmful effects.

## Conclusion

In light of the above literature review, the need to rethink the political and legal premises of dominant discourse on women’s rights, development, and modernity becomes clear, as does the imperative need to both re-appreciate the notions of human freedom and dignity and measure the elements of the aforementioned discourses in their relation to the self, consciousness, action, freedom, and dignity, and the extent of their contribution to liberation.

As part of these political exposés, the political question should be posed from a true radical perspective through the problematic relationship between authority and the subject, given contemporary theorizations on power. Coercion is often seen as a characteristic of the human self, which does not comply except through coercion and external imposition. This produces a parallelism between the relationship with objects and the relationship between humans, making the act of coercing people a natural one. This reality also undermines the notion of political modernity as a liberating discursive construction that permits human energies to assert themselves and achieve their potential. Thus, it is not strange for the modernist discourse to exist in a state of stasis

and reshaping, leading to a revision of the political concepts of the modernist discourse, with the goal of redefining them.

When framed within the context of the recent Arab revolutions, and the subsequent shifts that may lead to deep transformations in terms of redrawing the mechanisms of authority and formulating new policies, it is important to underscore that such revolutions constitute a reaction to the mechanisms of the modernizing state. Assuming that this thesis is correct, resorting again to the logic of the modernizing state that is based on the coercive interventionist principle, the relationship is placed between existence "as a potential" and real existence in a state of contradiction, which would undermine the hope for the emergence of new fruitful ideas, as well as the possibility of a real positive change in Arab society.

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