

Steven G. Marks, *The Information Nexus: Global Capitalism from the Renaissance to the Present*. Cambridge: [Cambridge University Press](#), 2016. xiv + 250pp., notes, index. Cloth; ISBN 978-1-107-10868-4 £54.99, Paper; ISBN 978-1-107-51963-3 £19.99.

Steven Marks, professor of history at Clemson University and the author of *The Information Nexus: Global Capitalism from the Renaissance to the Present* has undertaken what is surely not the easiest of scholarly endeavours: “to call into question everything we thought we knew” about capitalism. This brave approach is, in my opinion, the key to the book’s appeal and many strengths, but, at the same time, also the reason for its unconvincing overall thesis.

The book opens with a demonstration of some of the varieties of the ways in which the term ‘capitalism’ was discussed, applied and understood since being coined during the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century. The argument is that not many common denominators can be found when comparing the many cultural, linguistic and political environments in which capitalism was manifested. In other words, if one thinks that capitalism can be defined according to certain prevailing beliefs about accumulation of capital, private property or profit-seeking, Marks demonstrates that none of these concepts can be considered unique to capitalist systems, nor as a steady, definitive element with which one can understand its fundamental essence.

And so, what is capitalism all about? Marks’ answer, as can be guessed from the book’s title, is that it is about the ability to marshal ‘the information nexus’ which is “the dense web of information seeking and generating that resulted from having ready access to a complex of ever-changing information, communication and transportation technologies”, (x). In short, Marks claims that the ability to maintain a proper flow of information (on individual, business and state levels) within the ever-changing information environments of modernity, is the true secret to capitalism’s success as the one economic system to stand out from the various socio-economic experiments of modern history. To prove this point Marks takes his readers on a dazzling tour of the technological inventions which shaped human lives over the last 500 years and the ways in which they were applied within the ‘information nexus’, with its increasing capabilities to communicate information over ever-growing spaces, at an ever-growing speed and with improved clarity of messages. It is important to note that Marks performs this task with a clear, concise and highly readable writing style.

Coming from the field of Information Studies I share Marks enthusiasm and belief that exploring information-related behaviours, institutions and technologies can greatly improve our ability to understand past, and present, social structures. In that sense, I found this book to be an enlightening read and recommend it to business historians who could find in its pages a lot of ‘clues’ regarding the information technology infrastructures that helped certain businesses and industries to flourish – or fail – at various places and times. Furthermore, the conceptual framework offered by this book can help to clarify some of the social effects created by reliance on certain information technologies, effects not always easily visible - and at times intentionally hidden - from the public eye.

Yet, something in the broadness of Marks' thesis on the relationship between capitalism and 'the information nexus' strikes me as effusive. Besides a natural suspicion of any explanation that tries to solve highly complicated issues with a single 'magic' key, it also seems that the term "information nexus" suffers from the same vagueness which Marks so brilliantly assigns to the term capitalism in the first part of the book, a vagueness which hinders the ability to present it as a persuasive explanation to the question he is trying to answer. And besides, is there any human interaction which is not a part of an 'information nexus'? Can we confidently divide 'information flows' according to the economic systems under which they take place? Don't we know that more freedom and access to information, as well as 'faster' or 'improved' communication technologies don't always equate with better - or at least more rational - economic behaviours? Where do we place deliberate acts of mis-information and dis-information (or the "capitalist", inside-information) within the nexus? And even if adopting the book's thesis based on historical evidence, can it still be applied to our own, present day? Does present day capital still depend on the smooth flow of information as an engine for growth, or do the sheer abundance of raw data and the capabilities for its automatic analysis, transform also the value of information as a commodity? I am not sure such questions can be answered, but they do serve to show some of the difficulties arising when trying to apply 'information' as a sweeping theoretical construct.

More importantly, it is common knowledge that all around us a profound, ongoing, 'information revolution' is taking place. If we agree that the duty of historians is to examine the past out of a commitment to the present and the future of the societies in which they live, then *The Information Nexus* clearly fulfills this duty and as such, can be seen as a timely and well-deserved contribution to the economic history bookshelf.

**Amir Lavie**  
**University of Toronto**