



INFORMATION REVOLUTIONS IN THE HISTORY OF THE WEST

by Leonard M. Dudley

Each period of Western history has given rise to puzzles that have stumped most observers. From the collapse of the Carolingian empire to the fall of the Berlin Wall, for every suggested explanation, there is a convincing counter-argument. Rather than search for a custom-tailored explanation of each event, this study presents evidence of an overall pattern generated by mutations in information technology. Social revolutions in the West have been preceded by innovations that altered the balance between *scale economies* (the impact of production volume on unit cost) and *network effects* (the gain to network members when a new individual joins). This timing is not a coincidence. Informational scale economies and network effects establish the optimal structure of a society, determining whether decision-making is centralized, decentralized or broadly distributed. Initially, each shock had a dramatic result, blasting apart existing interpersonal networks. Then, out of the debris, a new society painfully emerged.

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