

NIGHTSTAND

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Globalization and the internet: two hot topics we discuss much, but understand little. Now we have *Digital Capitalism: Networking the Global Market System* by Dan Schiller. This accessible small volume, written by a professor of communications, treats cyberspace as a function of very concrete and human relations, not as an ethereal bubble unconnected to the world in which we live. Schiller helps us get past the hype and reminds us that technological change can be understood. Perhaps it can be mastered.

Schiller begins with advances in telecommunications technology buried in the deepest recesses of the American military. There the costs of research

and development were socialized by the state. Starting in the 1950s and continuing into the 1970s, however, these technologies became the private property of multinational corporations.

At the same time, the industry was progressively deregulated until telecommunications eluded all but the most minor forms of state control.

As a result, the internet and telecommunications now “comprise a leading edge of [the] epic transnationalization of economic activity,” writes Schiller. In this context, transnationalization means the rapid flow of capital and financial instruments across the borders of nation-states, virtually rendering these states obsolete as arbiters of economic policy.

My own observation here: Taken to its logical conclusion, Schiller’s account vividly demonstrates how the capitalist state contains within itself the seeds of its own destruction. It is not being buried

by a revolutionary proletariat, however, as some expected 150 years ago.

Instead, the capitalist state (and national sovereignty) are being buried by a revolutionary transnationalism which is sweeping away all the relics of the old society in its path.

One final note. *Digital Capitalism* is sharply focused. For a broader frame you might read the relevant chapters from Eric Hobsbawm’s encyclopedic *The Age of Extremes* or William Greider’s *One World Ready or Not*.

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My favorite novel of all time is *Antarctic Navigation* by Elizabeth Arthur. Written as a memoir, the protagonist — Morgan Lamont — is fascinated by Robert Falcon Scott, the explorer who died while returning from the South Pole. Scott reached the pole only days after Roald Amundsen. Although Amundsen won the race, and lived to tell about it, Scott’s story is arguably the more compelling, in large part because of the many philosophical and practical differences between the two men and their expeditions.

While Amundsen killed 24 dogs to get to the Pole, Scott and his men dragged the sledges themselves rather than kill dogs. Amundsen raced to the pole, hoisted a flag, took a picture and raced back. Scott’s party collected fossils and meteorites, took barometric, wind and other readings, and focused on the underlying scientific purpose of exploration. Even after they ran out of food, Scott’s party continued to haul their 30 tons of fossils and rock samples. The book raises the question of how the world might have been different had Scott won the race.

Amundsen’s victory epitomizes the success at any cost mindset. Scott would not kill dogs, would not sacrifice nature, for man’s purposes. If he had succeeded, would that lesson have changed the progress of the world? Morgan conceives of replicating Scott’s expedition — going in his footsteps, without dogs, a kind of performance art that would show an alternative to progress at any price.

