

## Knowledge and Competitive Advantage

Johann Peter Murmann *The Coevolution of Firms,  
Technology, and  
National Institutions*



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## Knowledge and Competitive Advantage

The Coevolution of Firms, Technology, and National Institutions

Series: *Cambridge Studies in the Emergence of Global Enterprise*

Johann Peter Murmann

Australian Graduate School of Management

Entrepreneurs, managers, and policy makers must make decisions about a future that is inherently uncertain. Since the only rational guide for the future is the past, analysis of previous episodes in industrial development can shape informed decisions about what the future will hold. Historical scholarship that seeks to uncover systematically the causal processes transforming industries is thus of vital importance to the executives and managers shaping business policy today. With this in mind, Johann Peter Murmann compares the development of the synthetic dye industry in Great Britain, Germany, and the United States through the lenses of evolutionary theory. The rise of this industry constitutes an important chapter in business, economic, and technological history because synthetic dyes, invented in 1856, were the first scientific discovery quickly to give rise to a new industry. Just as with contemporary high tech industries, the synthetic dye business faced considerable uncertainty that led to many surprises for the agents involved. After the discovery of synthetic dyes, British firms led the industry for the first eight years, but German firms came to dominate the industry for decades; American firms, in contrast, played only a minor role in this important development. Murmann identifies differences in educational institutions and patent laws as the key reasons for German leadership in the industry. Successful firms developed strong ties to the centers of organic chemistry knowledge. As Murmann demonstrates, a complex coevolutionary process linking firms, technology, and national institutions resulted in very different degrees of industrial success among the dye firms in the three countries.

### From the reviews:

*"Rarely has any student of economic change combined impeccable scholarship, sophisticated theory, challenging ideas, and engaging narrative in the elegant manner of Johann Peter Murmann. Readers who have no interest whatsoever in industrial chemistry will nevertheless learn a great deal about economic processes from Murmann's original, ambitious work."*

— Charles Tilly, Joseph L. Bottenwieser Professor of Social Science, Columbia University

*"If evolutionary models are to be successful at all in the social sciences, it is in enhancing our understanding of technological and economic performance in the past. In this pioneering work, Johann Peter Murmann does exactly that, and immediately establishes himself as one of the most innovative and bold scholars in the field. Using evolutionary theory and management science, this book sheds important light on the nineteenth-century chemical industry. This is one of the most methodologically original books in interdisciplinary history to come out in recent years."*

— Joel Mokyr, Robert H. Strotz Professor of Arts and Sciences and Professor of Economics and History, Northwestern University

*"Murmann's book all in all is a masterpiece of historical sociology. It achieves both completeness and particularity. \* For business historians, Murmann's work demonstrates the exciting potential of an organized and systematic effort, creatively presented, to make industrial history meaningful to managers, and other historians, without sacrificing richness of detail."*

— *Enterprise and Society*

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