In November 2010, Google’s Eric Schmidt and Jared Cohen predicted that governments would be “caught off-guard when large numbers of their citizens, armed with virtually nothing but cell phones, take part in mini-rebellions that challenge their authority.”

A month later, revolutionaries used the power of “network society” to overthrow authoritarian rulers in the Middle East. Would hierarchical governments throughout the world, some wondered, soon become more efficient and accountable e-democracies?

Niall Ferguson — a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University and a self-proclaimed “networks guy” — is acutely aware of the unprecedented reach of email, text messaging, smartphones and social media. The author of “Civilization,” “The War of the World” and “The Great Degeneration” reminds us, however, that the urge to network is innate and ancient, and that the deepest social networks have been — and remain — “local and sociable.”

In his latest book “The Square and the Tower: Networks and Power from the Freemasons to Facebook,” Mr. Ferguson takes Winston Churchill’s aphorism — “The longer you can look back, the farther you can look forward” — as his point of departure and provides an engaging, provocative history of networks (and their relationships to hierarchies) from ancient times to the invention of the printing press to the pervasiveness of the personal computer.

Breathtaking in its scale and scope, “The Square and the Tower” applies insights of network theory to (among other subjects) Portugal’s foothold in Macau, the “conquest” of the Incas, the Reformation, the Enlightenment, the American Revolution, the Industrial Revolution, World War I, Stalin’s Terror, World War II, the fall of the Soviet Union, the founding of the European Union and the Great Recession of 2008-09.
Marked by his claim that it is “naive to assume that we are witnessing the dawn of a new era of free and equal netizens, all empowered by technology to speak truth to power,” Mr. Ferguson’s analysis of the IT revolution is often compelling.

That said, the fundamental argument of “The Square and the Tower” about the conflict between networks and hierarchies is not all that persuasive. Contrary to Mr. Ferguson’s claims, historians have not neglected networks, failed to reconstruct them, or ignored their impact. Consider, for example, the role historians assign to Sons of Liberty and Committees of Correspondence during the American Revolution.

Or the endorsement they have given to Alexis de Tocqueville’s analysis of the dense network of civic associations in the United States as essential to the success of its democratic “experiment.”

More important, perhaps, along with a warning against “false dichotomies” to which he does not always adhere, Mr. Ferguson acknowledges that networks often establish hierarchical structures, even as they malign established hierarchies, and that hierarchies “are just special kinds of networks in which flows of information or resources are restricted to certain edges in order to maximize the centrality of the ruling node.”

For this reason, and others, Mr. Ferguson’s account of the rise, fall and rise of networks seems simplistic. His networks versus hierarchies framework, moreover, rarely challenges or changes conventional wisdom about the events chronicled in his book.

“The Square and the Tower” also contains ideologically loaded and, in my judgment, simplistic, claims. President Dwight D. Eisenhower, Mr. Ferguson writes, “need not have worried” about the excessive power of the military industrial complex.

The only path to prosperity, according to Mr. Ferguson, involves a rejection of government planning in favor of market mechanisms that free millions of households “to make billions of choices, to which hundreds of thousands of firms could respond.” President Barack Obama’s administrative/regulatory state “represents the last iteration of political hierarchy: a system that spews out rules, generates complexity, and undermines both prosperity and stability.” As a result of Mr. Obama’s “mistakes” in the Middle East, “the world now finds itself in the grip of an epidemic of Islamist terror.”

Mr. Ferguson’s political predilections also inform his assessment of 21st-century networks. Despite its promise of a diverse, democratic world of interconnected netizens, he indicates, the structure of digital networks is “profoundly inegalitarian,” with ownership concentrated in a handful of Silicon Valley insiders.

In traditional societies, market forces tend to promote social mobility and meritocracy. “But when
networks and markets are aligned, as in our time, inequality explodes.”

We should be frightened by the new geopolitical network he calls “Cyberia,” Mr. Ferguson concludes. The best defense against hackers, terrorists, purveyors of fake news, and surveillance in the name of national security, he suggests, without elaboration, involves opting for simplicity and resisting the temptation of imposing regulatory complexity.

He is not confident, however, that good guys will prevail.

Readers across the political spectrum, I suspect, may share Niall Ferguson’s pessimism.

Glenn C. Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell University.