Gabriele Balbi, The Digital Revolution, A Short History of an Ideology, Oxford University Press, 2023.

In short, this volume aims to tell the story of an idea, probably the most powerful idea of recent decades: that digitization constitutes a revolution, a break with the past, a radical change for human beings who find themselves living through it.

The book aims to investigate the origins of this idea, how it evolved, which other past revolutions consciously or unconsciously inspired it, which great stories it has conveyed over time, which of its key elements have changed, and which ones have persisted and have been repeated in different historical periods. All of these discussions, large and small, have settled and become condensed into a series of media, advertising, corporate, political, and technical sources. […]

But why should the digital revolution be an ideology? The term ideology has essentially two meanings that have filtered into the common consciousness, the first being a specific vision of the world and the second a false or distorted way of thinking. Both of these dimensions are applicable to the digital revolution. Starting with the concept of ideology as a vision of the world, the digital revolution is an idea that has dominated recent decades. Having entered the collective awareness, it has made digitization the supreme principle, relegating everything else—the non-digital—to the background. It has a systematic character, that provides an exhaustive and coherent explanation of historical processes: exhaustive because, more than any other idea, the digital revolution has allowed us to read and interpret reality in an immediate and understandable way; coherent because it proposes a clear, stable, and stabilizing vision of the world in which the digital revolution is the dominant paradigm of the present (and of the future), a glue used by contemporary societies to hold themselves together, even to recognize each other, as well as to adopt common habits and dreams.

In this respect, the digital revolution even seems to have an all-encompassing quality because it provides an explanation of the world that applies to every field of human knowledge and practice and, unlike more limited ideologies, allows a global reading of all human phenomena. The digital revolution has these characteristics: political parties and politics have changed due to the advent of digitization, the economy has been disrupted by telematics, our ways of communicating and being in the world are not comparable to what they were in the pre-digital era. Think of any field of human activity and you’ll find a book, a guru, or a company ready to tell you that the digital revolution has changed it forever.

What’s more, this world view has a hold on reality; it guides and transforms societies. It’s an idea that influences behaviors, habits, and everyday life. Billions of people take for granted that they are part of an epochal revolution which has allowed them to communicate and do things that were impossible or even unthinkable a few decades earlier. So they buy, work, and play—spending most of their time fiddling with digital objects, but above all they have married (and loved) the idea of being immersed in the digital revolution. If, until a few decades ago, the adepts of the digital revolution constituted a niche of technology experts, seen as eccentric people and given odd monikers like hackers, nerds, or geeks (which refers precisely to the semantics of the bizarre), today, billions of people go into ecstasies over the market’s latest product launch. The base of the revolution’s evangelists has thus expanded to embrace ordinary people, fascinated by the design of digital media, the connective potential of social media, or life-enhancing technologies. In the words of Antonio Gramsci, the digital revolution is a form of cultural hegemony that has imposed a benchmark cultural universe on societies, one that we’ve all internalized and made our own. And in this respect, the digital revolution is a hegemonic ideology because it has in fact colonized much of contemporary discourse, thoughts, and dreams. Note: I don’t want to apply any negative associations to the concepts of all-encompassing or hegemonic ideology; it’s only a first step in reconstructing, in the most neutral way possible, the historical-cultural path of the digital revolution so far.

However, as mentioned, the word ideology also has a second meaning that refers to a semantics of a false or distorted way of thinking. In this sense, the digital revolution could be interpreted as a sort of scam or conscious deception, useful to achieve certain ends and objectives generally of an economic nature. The digital revolution is undoubtedly driven by various partisan interests, led by human beings, but also by companies, objects, and places that, while not representing themselves as a specific political party or group as some of the “classic” ideologies do, have become dominant classes or symbols nevertheless. […] I do not believe that the digital revolution is a deception perpetrated by stakeholders who don’t actually believe in the revolution itself. Quite the opposite: those protagonists of the revolution who will find ample space in this book genuinely believe or believed that the digital revolution would change (or can still change) humanity. Clearly, these people, just like any revolutionary characters and heroes—is there a revolution without its heroes?—have something to gain, but even for the digital revolution’s protagonists, the aspect of self-conviction or self-deception seems more decisive and significant than a deliberate deception.