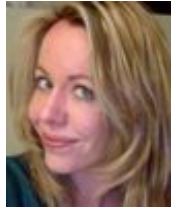


Book Review: The Violent Image: Insurgent Propaganda and the New Revolutionaries

Blog Admin

*Fast-moving, self-propelled 'violent images' have radically changed the nature of insurgency in the modern world. The global media has revolutionised the way ideas, messages and images are disseminated, and the speed with which they travel. **Neville Bolt** investigates how today's revolutionaries have rejuvenated the nineteenth century 'propaganda of the deed' so that terrorism no longer simply goads states into overreacting, thereby losing legitimacy. **Ana Polo Alonso** finds an elegantly-written and well-researched read, suitable for students of media studies and terrorism.*

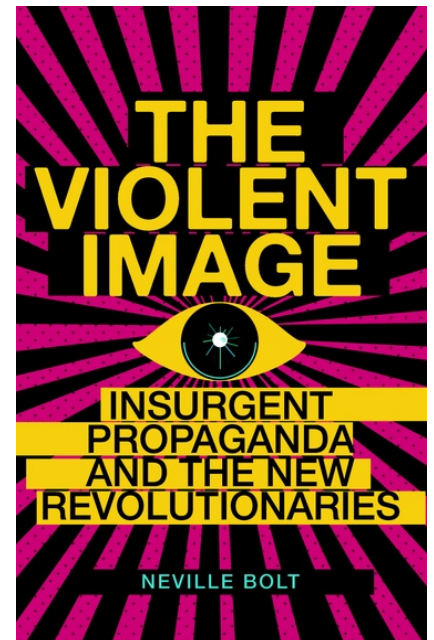


The Violent Image: Insurgent Propaganda and the New Revolutionaries. Neville Bolt. Hurst. May 2012.

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"We are selling the promise of a better future for our people and our children (...) It is important that all resistance fighters learn the basics of sales and marketing". These words were written by Anders Behring Breivik and released hours before he perpetrated the biggest terrorist attack in Norway in the last five decades – a heinous act that cost 76 lives.

As we witnessed on television and across the Internet the horrific acts of violence against innocent people that unfolded first in Oslo and then on Utøya, it was almost impossible not to feel awestruck – even full of impotence, rancor and fury. Those harrowing images will have provoked thoughts of bewilderment for many: how can these aberrant actions trigger in some people morsels of sympathy towards the causes the perpetrators allege to support, and towards the perpetrators themselves? How do some accept these radical acts as a necessity – even as a ghastly form of propaganda or marketing, as Breivik did? *The Violent Image* aims to cast some light onto these intricate issues.



Author, [Neville Bolt](#), a Teaching Fellow and Research Associate in the Department of War Studies at King's College London, accurately explains that there is nothing new about acts of terrorism functioning as a way not only to produce harm, but also to spur interest in the underlying causes of those actions. Russian revolutionary [Mikhail Bakunin](#) formulated the idea that insurgent propaganda based solely upon words was futile, and that it had to be necessarily accompanied by forceful acts to prod authorities into overreacting in their response, propel an over-magnified retaliation, and thus propitiate a burst of commiseration, tolerance and even recognition towards the insurgents. This approach was called the "Propaganda of the Deed" (POTD), and basically vindicated that violent actions had to be deemed as a tactical maneuver, not an end *per se*. The importance was the resonance in people's minds of those acts, of those images, and the feelings they would ignite.

As the author points out, the POTD in the 19th Century was unsuccessful because insurgents at that time were “unable to reach mass audiences with its message” (p. 24), and thus they didn’t succeed at conveying “a sustained message and explain how using violence could deliver a better society” (p.50). Although major technological breakthroughs such as the telegraph, photography, motion picture cinema, and rotary printing presses occurred and developed during this period, most media outlets were still concentrated in the hands of few tycoons who exerted a fierce defence of the status quo and did not allow insurgent ideas to be propagated on their newspapers’ front covers. Thus, this inability to control the message prompted the POTD to fail.

Yet, as Bolt posits, it is important to rescue the concept of the POTD from the oblivion of history, for it has now more validity than ever. Bolt does a magnificent job in explaining how insurgents have (unconsciously) updated this 19th Century concept so as to fit “at the heart of contemporary Information Age” (p.1). There is no doubt that we live in a visual world, where images continue to speak louder than words –actually, they also speak more emotively, and in today’s world, they travel faster and are more easily shared.

As Bolt details, terrorists and insurgents are now very sophisticated in their use of new media facilities to propagate images of their acts. And, in fact, they are using to their own profit the easiness with which images are now disseminated through mobile devices, the Internet, and social media platforms – not to say the dilution of editorial filters – to reach a broader public. In so doing, this imagery is now placed at the very core of any insurgent strategy, and it has been transformed into a symbolic weapon, not only intended to shock people, but to create meaningful symbols and metaphors for determinate groups. The old dream of 19th Century anarchists is now brought to life as terrorists and insurgents create a new warfare scenario where “the narrative domain becomes the new, contested battlespace” (p.82).

This, obviously, creates new potential dangers. For, as Bolt states, “Today POTD images represent compelling ideas. So combating ideas, indeed ideologies or cosmologies of mythical narratives is something quite different from fighting a physical enemy” (p.193). Yet, as one might still wonder, how can these images spur sympathy? How do they exactly trigger psychological mechanisms and forge collective narratives? How do they become metaphors or compelling ideas?

Attempting to answer these questions, *The Violent Image* delves into sociological and psychological forays. These aspects represent some of the book’s strengths, for – to the best of my knowledge – there is no other book that has so eloquently merged visual and cultural studies with a well-documented description of the psychological intricacies that these sorts of images happen to evoke in our brains, and the cultural representations they help to bring forth. Bolt describes how insurgents accurately craft stories that can easily be accepted by determined communities –stories filled with emotions, remembrances, and iconic references. Through well-orchestrated events, the constant repetition and quick dissemination of carefully selected images, terrorists are now able to convey their messages easily and to gain new adepts.

In closing, I cannot but praise this book. Bolt has produced an outstanding and engrossing opus: elegantly written, accurate, eloquent, well-researched, and brimming with thought-proving arguments. This is a book which, albeit is geared at a scholarly audience, can also well elate a broader public.

Ana Polo Alonso is a speechwriter and political adviser. She holds a BSc in Political Science from the Pompeu Fabra University (Barcelona), and a MA in Public Administration from Pompeu Fabra-ESADE. She also studied Marketing and Branding at the New York University, Project Management at Stanford, and specialized in Digital Marketing at Instituto de la Empresa (IE) Business School. Ana served as Responsible for Communications at the Women’s World Forum, and has collaborated with International Organizations to develop advocacy strategies. She was also Lecturer of Marketing at ESERP Business School, and taught Branding at the International MBA held at Staffordshire University-ESERP in Barcelona. She is currently finishing her first book, focused on the history of US Presidential campaigns. [Read more reviews by Ana.](#)

