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**Iconicity, Legitimacy, and the Visual Field: A Comparative Analysis of Revolutionary Imagery from State Propaganda to Citizen-Generated Content**

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**Abstract**

This essay argues that visual imagery is not peripheral to political mobilization but constitutive of it, and that the shift from state-controlled propaganda to citizen-generated content has produced a paradox: while the democratization of the image has expanded the reach of political movements, it has simultaneously eroded the persuasive power of any single image, creating a crisis of iconicity. Drawing on Max Weber's taxonomy of legitimacy and Murray Edelman's concept of symbolic politics as theoretical anchors, the essay conducts a comparative analysis of four case studies spanning the twentieth and twenty-first centuries: the Chinese Communist Party's construction of Maoist visual culture during the Cultural Revolution; the American Civil Rights Movement's disciplined deployment of mediated violence; the survival and censorship of the Tiananmen Square "Tank Man" photograph; and the Iran Woman, Life, Freedom movement and Black Lives Matter protests of the 2020s. Across these cases, three patterns emerge. First, control of the visual field has consistently functioned as control over political legitimacy. Second, the transition to citizen-generated imagery has created a trade-off between reach and durability, with strategic discipline, as demonstrated by the Civil Rights Movement, proving essential for achieving the iconic staying power of state propaganda. Third, digitalization has bifurcated imagery's relationship to power: states can suppress images domestically but cannot contain their international circulation. The essay concludes that in an era of infinite content, the movements most likely to achieve lasting political change are those that understand discipline not as a constraint on expression, but as its highest form.

**Introduction**

Every movement that has aimed to redistribute power has understood that it must first influence what people see. The production and control of revolutionary imagery is hence not a byproduct of political mobilization. Rather, it is constitutive of it. Yet the switch from state-controlled propaganda to citizen-generated content has fundamentally changed how legitimacy is cultivated, contested, and lost. Thus, this essay argues that while the democratization of the image has empowered movements against authoritarian states, it has created a crisis of iconicity, where an oversaturation of visual content has paradoxically weakened the persuasive power of any single image, with consequences for how political change is achieved.

**The Image as Political Infrastructure**

Political scientists regard legitimacy, the belief among a population that authority is rightfully held, as the precursor to long-lasting governance. Max Weber's taxonomy of legitimacy (Cotterrell) (traditional, charismatic, and rational-legal) identifies the ways through which this is achieved. All three of these depend on how authorities make themselves visible and recognizable to the general public. Traditional legitimacy is attained through the display of regalia. Charismatic legitimacy, by definition, requires a leader's image to be depicted in a

manner that solidifies the devotion of their followers. Even rational-legal legitimacy is established visually, through courtroom architecture, uniforms, and state ceremonies.

Consider Murray Edelman's concept of symbolic politics (Zhang), outlined as the use of symbols, rituals, and spectacles to compel political quiescence or mobilization, as a theoretical anchor. Historically, revolutionary imagery was enabled exclusively by institutional infrastructure (printing presses, state studios, party artists, and distribution networks). The digital era (Ishrat) rewrote this narrative within just a decade. The consequences, as the cases below will evidence, are not uniformly liberating or uniformly destabilizing. They are a contested terrain defined by the same power asymmetries that define politics itself.

### **Maoist China and the Semiotics of State Power**

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) built perhaps one of the most sophisticated propaganda systems, knowing that in order to gain legitimacy, not only military and economic improvements were requisites, but the reconstruction of visual culture ("Seeing Red") was as well. This was termed *meishu*, art that serves political means.

Strict iconographic rules dictated Mao Zedong's official portraiture. His image always appeared frontally or in three-quarter profile. The color palette consisted of revolutionary red and imperial gold, deliberately associating Communist ideas to Chinese dynastic traditions. Works such as Liu Chunhua's painting, *Chairman Mao Goes to Anyuan* (Brennan), depicting a young Mao striding towards a mining strike he helped organize, were reproduced and distributed over 900 million times. The painting did not simply commemorate an event. It initialized Mao's charismatic legitimacy that downplayed the catastrophic failures of the Great Leap Forward (Lü).

The Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) ("Art of the Mao Era") further weaponized imagery in Mao's political purge. Red Guards physically destroyed images of 'class enemies', practicing iconoclasm, where counter-narratives were eliminated, and loyalty was ensured. Meanwhile, visual propaganda such as the Little Red Book ("Who, What, Why"), revolutionary posters ("Chinese Cultural Revolution"), and ubiquitous portraits of Mao encroached on China's public. The state realized something political theorists would later formalize: whoever controls the visual field controls the available repertoire of political imagination. If Mao's face is everywhere and all others are destroyed, the people can only picture one future.

### **The Civil Rights Movement and Mediated Violence**

If the CPP showed the power of state-controlled propaganda, the American Civil Rights Movement (Carson) showed something more remarkable. A non-state actor, despite being incredibly vulnerable, developed a visual strategy so disciplined that it ultimately brought about concrete legislative change and eroded the state of its legitimacy.

The movement's tacticians, namely James Lawson ("Lawson, James M."), who trained activists in Gandhian non-violent discipline across the South, grasped that their target audience was not the segregationists that they opposed, but the Northern moderates that Martin Luther King Jr.

described in his 1963 ‘Letter from Birmingham Jail (King)’. By visually juxtaposing nonviolent protestors with violent state response, moral asymmetry was weaponized against the South.

This is seen in Birmingham’s Children’s Crusade (“Birmingham Children’s Crusade”) of May 1936. Organizers intentionally deployed children, whose vulnerability would intensify any moral reaction to violence, in full knowledge that Public Safety Commissioner Bull Connor would order the use of fire hoses and police dogs. The earlier case of Emmett Till (“Emmett Till’s Death”) parallels this, with Mamie Till-Mobley’s decision to hold an open-casket funeral for her son and to permit Jet Magazine to document his mutilated body. Images of both instances, which were explicit acts of visual politics, were circulated nationally and galvanized the movement in ways that years of legal argument had not.

### **Tiananmen Square and the Limits of Erasure**

On June 5, 1989, an unidentified man (“The Man Who Defied”) carrying shopping bags obstructed the path of Type 59 tanks moving through China’s Chang’an Avenue, symbolically challenging the state’s legitimacy. Four photographers captured what would become the most reproduced political image of the 20th century. The state suppressed the image domestically through hard and friction-based censorship, and confiscated the film of three of the photographers. In fact, research on Chinese internet censorship shows that a majority of Chinese youth cannot identify the photograph (Lim).

The fourth photographer, Jeff Widener, however, had hidden his film in his hotel room. Transmitting it via satellite, his image reached Western newsrooms within hours and was on front pages the following morning. This bifurcation exposes an innate limit of censorship: states can only control what their own citizens can see. Moreover, at every instance of Chinese state suppression, the image was invoked once again. Many describe this as the ‘memory paradox of authoritarian states (Wang et al.)’, where increased censorship only increases reproduction.

Most importantly, the image’s trajectory represents the transition to digitalization. In 1989, its survival depended entirely on human agency. Although once digitized, Tank Man became indestructible. Even though the Great Firewall (Roberts and Hauben) was built in direct response to it, no Chinese security force could confiscate a JPEG file on servers outside its jurisdiction.

### **Instagram Revolutions and the Crisis of Iconicity**

Contrary to Tank Man, digitalization is not wholly beneficial in political movements. While modern citizen-generated protest imagery democratizes political power, it also brings about structural degradation of such power.

Iran’s Woman, Life, Freedom movement (“Justice and Accountability”) of 2022, due to the murder of Mahsa Amini by morality police, resulted in an extraordinary magnitude of citizen imagery (Bouvier and Machin). Women publicly cut their hair and burnt their headscarves, all while on camera. Similarly, the filmed killing of George Floyd (“8 Minutes”) by a Minneapolis police officer in May 2022 caused the largest surge of protests in American history (“A Year of

Reckoning”), known as the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. Documentation of the protests reached every corner of the world.

Yet almost none of this imagery has achieved the same iconicity as Tank Man or the Birmingham photographs. The reason is structural. Political theorist W. Lance Bennett’s concept of collective action (Bennett and Segerberg), defined as the loosely networked and individually expressive political mobilization enabled by social media, explains this. Digital platforms lower the barriers to participation, subsequently diluting the collective attention needed for a single image to become the symbol of a movement. Our now algorithmic news cycles (Hastuti et al.) devalue what is considered yesterday’s news. The suppression of politically sensitive content (“Internet Censorship”) on platforms adds to this. Thus, even though the democratization of image production has made political movements more globally visible than at any point in history, the lack of a defining image prevents giving the movement a lasting historical identity.

### Comparative Analysis and Conclusion

Across these four cases, three patterns are seen that substantiate this essay’s argument. Firstly, in every instance, the control of visual imagery meant control over legitimacy. Whilst at varying levels of strategic consciousness, the image remained a commentary not on the political struggle itself, but on the terrain.

Secondly, the shift from state-controlled to citizen-generated imagery has created a trade-off between reach and durability. Albeit Mao’s visual propaganda is slow to produce, it is now embedded in history. Imagery from the Iran and BLM protests was explosive, but their reach was ephemeral. The Civil Rights Movement, however, stands as an exception. This is because a non-state actor achieved the same durability as state propaganda by utilizing state-like discipline when disseminating it.

Thirdly, digitalization has bifurcated imagery in a way that neither purely empowers it nor purely restrains it. With Tank Man, the Great Firewall was successful in censoring it nationally but powerless on the international level. In fact, contemporary platforms are similar in nature. They can suppress content domestically, but cannot stop its circulation globally.

The implication of these three patterns is rather sobering. The democratization of the image was intended to be unequivocally liberating. In a simpler sense, giving everyone a camera meant giving everyone power. What the comparative record shows instead is that without a strategy, the image produces reactionary noise, not genuine reform. The movements that rewrote history produced the right images, not the most. In conclusion, in order for any political movement to achieve success in this era of infinite content, one must acutely understand that discipline is not a limitation. Rather, it is the goal.

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