

‘Everything everywhere all at once’: Paradigm shifts, the dynamics of agency, and the January 6th assault on the US capitol

Leadership

2024, Vol. 0(0) 1–18

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DOI: 10.1177/117427150241234363

journals.sagepub.com/home/lea



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Abstract

To unpack the underlying causes of the events of January 6th, 2021, by supporters of outgoing President Trump, this essay pursues two lines of inquiry. Firstly, drawing on insights from Kuhn and Bion into, respectively, paradigm shifts and group dynamics, we argue support for Trump’s promise to ‘make American great again’ is rooted in anxiety triggered by various disruptive changes facing Americans. Followers alleviate this by becoming dependent upon Trump, thereby affording him undue influence. January 6th itself, we argue, was a paradigm shifting event, constituting a shattering betrayal of a sitting President’s fundamental duty to uphold the Constitution and keep the country safe from harm. Secondly, we examine the MAGA worldview, drawing on social identity theory, its offshoot regarding leadership, and notions of agency. We highlight its deleterious effects on how Trump and his followers exercised their agency and, simultaneously, how it legitimated Trump’s reckless betrayal of his responsibilities. Through our analysis of these underlying causes, we conclude that January 6th was no mere aberration in terms of what Trump and his supporters are capable of doing. Rather we contend the same forces animating what happened that day remain a clear and present danger to democracy in America.

Keywords

Donald trump, January 6th, leadership, United States politics, insurrection

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Introduction

‘The siege of the building is, in the end, the least of it.’ – Jill Lepore, ‘The American Beast’ (2023)

This paper examines various forces it argues were at play before, during, and after the insurrection at the U.S. Capitol on January 6th, 2021, which we argue help explain how and why such an event became possible. Since that day, what exactly took place, and why, remains hotly debated. Underlying this contestation is a seemingly fundamental disbelief that such an event could happen in the United States. On the one hand, the Republican party’s Make America Great Again (MAGA) wing claims its significance has been exaggerated—or, worse, it was a ‘false flag’ operation (French, 2023). Yet across the political spectrum there are also those who, at least beforehand, simply could not believe that such a thing was possible. A 2023 Senate report on the Capitol Police’s intelligence failure exemplifies this, concluding “government intelligence leaders failed to sound the alarm “in part *because they could not conceive that the U.S. Capitol Building would be overrun by rioters*” (Jalonick, 2023, italics ours).

Much effort has gone into understanding the factors leading up to and informing January 6th. In June 2022, the U.S. House of Representatives’ Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack on the Capitol convened the first of its public hearings, a widely aired series of televised events featuring interviews of multiple witnesses, many former employees of Donald Trump or his administration. The hearings culminated in a written report published in collaboration with outlets such as *The New Yorker* and *The New York Times*. These efforts to understand what happened and why were far-reaching, providing insight into the thinking of both rioters and instigators. And yet, as Harvard historian Jill Lepore argues, there is a fundamental omission in the Report:

A chronicle that runs from April 2020 to January 2021, it is a story told out of time. The ‘facts, circumstances, and causes’ relating to the insurrection that it fails to investigate and, in most cases, even to note, include COVID-19 deaths, masks, lockdowns, joblessness, farm closures, guns and mass shootings, a national mental-health crisis, daily reports of devastating storms and fires, George Floyd, Black Lives Matter, and partisan, and especially congressional, eye-gouging over each and every one of the items on this list....Was the election stolen? No. But was 2020 painful? Yes. (Lepore, 2023: p. 64).

More pointedly, Lepore presents a hypothetical case of Trumpism without Trump:

[T]he attempt to overturn the election ... require[s] an accounting of [the insurrection’s] deeper roots in American political behavior and discourse, of the anti-government takeover of the G.O.P., and of the role played by a hundred and forty-seven Republicans who, in the early morning of January 7th, 2021, only hours after the Capitol had been cleared of rioters, voted against certifying the results of the election. The siege of the building is, in the end, the least of it. (Lepore, 2023.)

Lepore’s critique thus points to factors beyond Donald Trump’s machinations as influential underlying causes for January 6th. Yet we think even her analysis does not go far enough. It is not just 2020, or even the period from 2016 that gave rise to January 6th. Rather, there are forces in American society that fostered and enabled ‘Trumpism,’—a political, social, and psychological phenomenon not under the exclusive control of the eponymous president whose re-election campaign culminated in this act of sustained violence. Furthermore, while assaults on symbolic edifices and political violence are not new in American politics, that an authority figure, the most powerful one in the land (if not the world), would facilitate and embolden such actions *is* new – and thus deserving of careful analysis.

This paper offers two distinct though related lenses to analyze the insurrection. First, we examine its causes at a macro level. Deploying a Kuhnian understanding of paradigm shifts, we ask not only what caused January 6th, but, also, what caused people to follow such a ‘darkly transformational’ leader as Donald Trump (cf., [Tourish, 2013](#))?¹ The questions are ineluctably related. To inform our argument we extrapolate from Kuhn’s 1970 definition of scientific paradigms as “an exemplar or model of puzzle solving” ([Bird, 2022](#), n.p.), to consider societal paradigms. The insights this gives rise to then draws us to ideas from depth psychology, specifically Bion’s insights on dependency dynamics in groups (cf., [Bion, 1961](#); [Petriglieri and Petriglieri, 2020](#)).

To understand why this unprecedented event occurred, our central thesis for this part of our analysis is that there are two paradigm shifts taking place, each of which contributed to the event. First, there is the profoundly disruptive set of challenges facing Americans, driven principally by globalization, global warming, demographic changes and demands for greater equality on grounds of gender and race, threatening traditional sources of income, power, and social status. The unravelling of established paradigms governing how American society functions arising from these forces forms the broad backdrop to the insurrection. Second, there is the paradigm shift of Trump’s unfolding response to the anxiety these societal shifts generate. That response formally begins with his 2015 announcement that he was running for President. It culminates with him, as a sitting president, for months actively undermining the democratic process and then, on January 6th itself, refusing for hours to call a stop to the physical manifestation of what he had long solicited. Such actions would previously have been unthinkable. Accordingly, we posit Trump’s response to a societal level paradigm shift is, in and of itself, paradigm shifting in nature, shattering faith in the norms and institutions that had, until January 6th, underpinned American democracy. The anxieties provoked by these paradigm shifts are profound, giving rise to the desire amongst some for a strong authority figure upon whom group members feel they can depend, dynamics which we draw on Bion’s work (1961) to understand.

The second lens we deploy addresses the insurrection on a micro level, unpacking the characteristics and dynamics of the shared social identity connecting Trump and his followers, thereby shaping the exercise of their individual and collective agency. Theoretically, we draw on social identity theory of leadership and the concept of agency, focusing particularly on the beliefs, norms and values comprising the MAGA worldview and how these inform January 6th and its immediate aftermath. Our central thesis for this part of our analysis is that in the context of ‘the Big Lie’, Trump’s false claim that he won the 2020 election, and calls by him to ‘stop the steal,’ the MAGA worldview constituting the shared social identity binding Trump and his followers together motivated and gave license to the attempted insurrection, and his immediate responses to it. As this worldview continues to animate Trump’s MAGA movement, we argue it constitutes an ongoing danger to democratic governance and the rule of law in the United States—a matter of global concern.

In sum, we deploy both a telescopic and a microscopic lens on this event. Telescopically, we consider the historical moment of paradigm shifts and their attendant anxiety with which Americans are contending. Microscopically, we zero in on how certain characteristics animating the MAGA movement have deleterious effects on how its adherents exercise their individual and collective agency, rendering what took place as both legitimate and necessary in their eyes.

What happened on January 6th

Drawing from the *Report on January 6th* ([The Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack on the United States Capitol, 2022](#)), we summarize here events leading up to the abortive

insurrection on the afternoon of Wednesday 6 January 2021 in Washington, DC, during which Congress was scheduled to count and certify the votes of the Electoral College for the U.S. presidential election of 2020.

As early as June 2020 (Isenstadt, 2020) President Trump knew there was a strong possibility he would lose the November election. In August 2020 he began spawning the ‘Big Lie’, stating his loss was only possible “if the election is rigged” (Axelrod, 2022). This phase of the Big Lie reached its apex on November 5th, 2 days after the election, when Trump publicly claimed he had won in a landslide victory. However, with the pandemic motivating greater use of absentee and mail-in ballots, vote counting was still in progress. The ‘Red mirage’ of an apparent Trump lead at the beginning of the vote count had been predicted, as many Blue (Democrat leaning) states had higher rates of absentee/mail-in voting than Red (Republican leaning) states. As Trump started to make his false and unsubstantiated claims, major networks cut away, leaving only cable news networks CNN and Fox to broadcast his remarks (Baker and Haberman, 2020). Two days later, on Saturday 7 November, major television and cable networks, including Fox, declared Biden the victor.

Over the next 2 months, Trump pursued multiple paths to block Biden from taking office. These included 62 court cases, only one of which was found to have any merit (Cummings et al., 2021); contacting state supervisors of elections (most famously, asking Georgia Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger if he could ‘find 11,780 votes’); and ending with a last ditch effort to convince Vice President Mike Pence he had the Constitutional authority to do away with the Electoral College votes.

Trump’s narrative for the Stop the Steal rally, held in Washington on January 6th, once again repeated the Big Lie, imploring his supporters to ‘save our democracy’ and ‘take back our country’ (Naylor, 2021). The rally’s carnival-like atmosphere morphed into a riot and attempted insurrection at the Capitol, during which some of Trump’s supporters assaulted the Capitol Police, broke into the building illegally, and briefly occupied the Upper Chamber and the office of Speaker of the House. One Trump supporter was shot and killed by Capitol Police; six other deaths are attributed to physical or psychological injuries incurred that day (Cameron, 2022).

The report states

From the time Trump’s speech ended at 1:10 p.m. until he sent a video message asking the protestors to go home ‘in peace’ at 4:17 p.m., 187 minutes—over three hours—passed. Here’s what President Trump did during that period: mostly, he watched the attack from his TV screen. His channel of choice was Fox News. He issued a few tweets, some on his own inclination and some only at the repeated behest of his daughter and other trusted advisors. He made several phone calls, some to his personal lawyer Rudolph Giuliani, some to members of Congress about continuing their objections to the electoral certification, even though the attack was well underway. Here’s what President Trump did not do: he did not call any relevant law enforcement agency to ensure they were working to quell the violence; he did not call the Secretary of Defense; he did not call the Attorney General; he did not call the Secretary of Homeland Security. And for hours on end, he refused the repeated requests—from nearly everyone who talked to him—to tell his supporters to go home. (The Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack on the United States Capitol, 2022, p 593-594).

Part I: The telescopic view

The nature of paradigm shifts

We begin with paradigm shifts because we are asking the related questions not only what caused January 6th but, also, what caused people to follow such a darkly transformational leader as Donald

Trump? To understand why this unprecedented event took place, it is important to identify the underlying forces at play. As signaled above, we argue two interrelated paradigm shifts are foundational influences enabling and motivating what happened that day.

Philosopher Thomas Kuhn coined the term ‘paradigm shift’ in his seminal volume, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962/2012). His core insight was the important role revolutionary, rather than just incremental, changes in understanding have in science. He termed these changes paradigm shifts and saw them as being ineluctably linked with society’s readiness – or otherwise – to accept a new paradigm. Despite the book’s title, his approach is not limited to the physical sciences. While critics argue Kuhn’s definition lacks consistency and precision, we rely on his 1996 definition of paradigms as constituting “an exemplar or model of puzzle-solving” (Bird, 2022, n.p.) A paradigm in science thus comprises a basic set of rules and assumptions regarding a discipline or topic, providing confidence and a sense of predictability about how some aspect of the world works. A paradigm shift, in Kuhn’s view, disrupts all that: what had seemed true and certain is no longer the case, but, simultaneously, what replaces it may not be clear, or is clear but is seen as threatening and undesirable². We propose that what happened on January 6th has to do, at least in part, with the nature of paradigm shifts and the anxieties they provoke, and we draw on Kuhn’s work as a heuristic for explaining this.

As examples of such dynamics, Galileo’s support for Copernicus’s discovery of a heliocentric versus geocentric system upset the then Pope’s prevailing paradigm, resulting in Galileo being placed under house arrest. A parallel example centuries later is seen in the historic Supreme Court decision, *Brown vs. Board of Education*, requiring public school integration ‘with all deliberate speed’. Some counties shut down public schools altogether for years, rather than accept the changed paradigm that integration entailed.

Kuhn describes these disruptions to established ways of understanding as “anomalies”, arguing that if “unresolved, an anomaly brings forth a *crisis*” (Devlin and Bokulich, 2015, p. 2, italics in the original). Hence, we extrapolate from the situation of a crisis arising in a scientific laboratory when what was thought to be true proves no longer to be dependable to help explain the sense of crisis some Americans feel regarding a range of societal shifts. While it remains difficult to quantify, we think it reasonable to posit that the more profound and demanding the paradigm shift, the more intense the resistance to it will be – at least for a time. The link between science and social norms, in these cases, is that of society’s readiness for things to change.

How January 6th was spawned

In unpacking the causes of January 6th and why people follow Trump, we see two paradigm shifts occurring in sequence. First, and as the broader backdrop, how American society functions faces massive disruption arising from several key challenges, namely globalization, global warming, demographic change, the #MeToo movement’s demand for gender equality, and the Black Lives Matter movement’s demand for racial equality. Each threatens the established social order and their combined impacts have the potential to be paradigmatically transformative. We argue Trump has skillfully tapped into the anxieties arising from this, offering the vision of a return to a comfortable past – ‘Make America Great Again’ – and reassuring people that he ‘alone can fix it’ (Trump, 2016).

Those accepting his ‘solutions’ exemplify what Wilfred Bion, in his analysis of the basic assumptions unconsciously shaping group dynamics, called a ‘basic assumption of dependency’, comprising an inordinate degree of reliance on those in authority to direct group members’ thoughts and actions (cf., Bion, 1961). In such cases group members “act as if the source of all the group’s

trouble is a discrete threat, internal or most often external to the group, which they must destroy or avoid at all costs” (Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2020, p. 419).

Accordingly, Trumpism, as a movement, can be usefully understood as both a reflection of the anxieties provoked by a broader societal paradigm shift and a particular kind of response to those anxieties, namely one rooted in a shared dependency on an authority figure. As Tourish has written, Trump ‘has the demagogue’s age-old ability to identify scapegoats who could be blamed for all manner of problems, and a limited vocabulary which needs only to howl with contagious rage’ (Tourish, 2023, n.p.). This dependency dynamic between Trump and his followers underpins his subsequent ability to engage in paradigm shifting actions with respect to the viability and stability of American democracy.

Second, then, with January 6th we have the paradigm shift of an American president acting like a dictator, endeavoring to rid the democratic system of checks and balances and replace it with appointed loyalists. This characterization does not imply dictators cannot be democratically elected or that corruption has never existed in American government. Rather, we argue that Trump’s moves to amass power and overthrow democratic norms are paradigm shifting in their shameless and audacious breaching of conventions that, since 1801, have enabled power to transfer peacefully from one administration to the next following an election. Just as Hurricane Katrina breached the levees in 2005, January 6th similarly broke through a long standing and seemingly stable edifice of rules and assumptions about how American Presidents should and could act. Trump continues such violative efforts even now, in the lead up to the 2024 election, saying in recent months that if he re-elected he would be a dictator but ‘only on day one’ (Colvin and Barrow, 2023), describing his opponents as ‘vermin’ and claiming that immigration is ‘poisoning the blood of our country,’ thereby drawing directly from authoritarian and fascist ideology and rhetoric (Kurtzleben, 2023; Tourish, 2023).

Trump’s potential to violate the democratic paradigm was evident in the lead up to January 6th when he tried to appoint Jeffery Clark, a conspiracy theorist about the election, to run the Department of Justice; only a mass resignation threat by a group of Assistant Attorneys General put him off (Chen, 2022). Indeed, as far back as 2016 Trump equivocated when questions arose about whether he would accept the election result on that occasion. Yet behind this, and all of Trump’s other efforts to prevent the transfer of power to President Elect Biden, we argue was the inability by Trump and his followers to cope with his election loss. Essentially, we contend that the fact of Trump’s loss to Biden was psychologically, emotionally, and cognitively unbearable to them and thus subjectively ‘needed’ to be denied. Notably, this replicates how Trumpism more generally rests on a refusal to adapt to societal changes and the denial that such is even necessary. What is sought instead is the resurrection of a partially mythic and partially real past, providing MAGA adherents a greater sense of comfort and safety. Objectively, the world is round, objectively it is changing, and objectively Trump lost the election. Yet as Kuhn has argued, people must subjectively be ready to accept an ‘objective’ change in reality or they will resist it mightily as Kuhn also writes: ‘Novelty emerges only with difficulty, manifested by resistance, against a background provided by expectation’ (1970, p. 64).

The events of January 6th epitomize both the power and potential dangers of paradigm shifts. Reflecting its significance, despite numerous discussions and reports there is a felt sense that it remains indigestible to the American mind. On the one hand, the far right claims it has been exaggerated or was a conspiracy. On the other, the demonization of Trump. And while we readily agree that his words, narrative, and action-within-inaction were central to the attempted insurrection, we align ourselves with Lepore’s assertion that Trump’s embrace of chaos and conspiracy are rooted in a seething sense of frustration and nihilism, born of years of disappointment and the anxieties arising from the disappearance of a way of life.

January 6th: A gestalt

Despite thousands of hours of video footage, psychological, emotional, and political perspectives have colored our view of January 6th. To reference the well-known duck/rabbit illusion (cf., [Kindi, 2021](#)), most people seem to see what occurred at least to some degree according to their expectations and beliefs. As recently as May 2023 Trump hailed it as “a beautiful day” ([Trump, 2023](#)). Despite the persistence of the Big Lie believers who plan to vote for Trump again in 2024, some mainstream analysts now consider the institutional norms of the Republic to have survived a ‘stress test’ (e.g., Kidd, 11/11/22, personal communication). The judicial system has endured without interruption as arrests have been made, confessions offered, and prison sentences meted out.

Here the famous drawing of what could be a duck or a rabbit, depending on your perspective, serves as a useful metaphor: we invoke Kuhn’s epiphany, inspired by that image when he emphasized the confusion that surrounds competing paradigms (1970). By analogy, we suggest the tensions between how varying factions within American society view January 6th constitute a proxy for how they view the workings of their government more broadly. At its crudest level, the Capitol rioters invoked ‘1776’, the year of the American revolution, when those seeking the freedom and right to determine their own destiny overthrew British monarchical rule because it failed to serve the people’s interests. This history-making event provided both inspiration and validation for the January 6th insurrectionists as they endeavored to violently and illegally transgress upon the lawful and peaceful transfer of power from one president’s administration to the next. More broadly, there is a revolution in thinking afoot on both sides of the political aisle about how valid and dependable our democratic norms and practices may be in the midst of the broader paradigm shifts discussed earlier. Whereas liberals seek evidence, reason, due process, and the rule of law – as well as embracing certain liberal values, emphasizing tolerance, inclusion, and diversity – MAGA conservatives seek to uphold a nostalgic fantasy, irrespective of a changing demographic, economic and geopolitical landscape and changing social mores, and seem willing to embrace an authoritarian style of leadership that suppresses dissenting views.

Further, just as the two perceptions of the same drawing have some commonality (cf., [Kindi, 2021](#)), both ends of the political spectrum regard the U.S as teetering toward authoritarianism, albeit they see this as emerging from vastly different sources. Be that as it may, most mainstream analysts agree the weight falls on the side of Trumpism as a far greater danger than any overreach by the Biden and Obama administrations. As Kirschner has put it, ‘The world cannot unsee the Trump presidency’ (2021, n.p.). Tellingly, the U.S. has been listed as a “backsliding democracy” by such organizations as *Foreign Policy* ([Carothers and Press, 2022](#)). What was once unthinkable seems to be taking place. The symbolic and actual bedrock of a democratic system, the peaceful transfer of power, has been breached, and this breach is more dangerous and damaging than the assault on any edifice. The fact it was an unsuccessful in terms of its immediate aims is, as Lepore has stated, secondary ([Lepore, 2023](#)).

An additional analogy for paradigm shifts is offered by Kuhn when he describes the use of inverted eyeglasses as part of “an experiment on the psychology of perception in which the normal vision field is turned upside down by inverting glasses and then eventually rights itself as the subject becomes accustomed to the upside-down perspective” ([Daston, 2016](#), p. 115). This analogy helps illustrate how American citizens accustomed to democratic norms struggle to navigate the reality that Trump and his supporters have eroded much of what we have taken for granted in our institutions. The stark reality that President Trump, as Commander in Chief, for several hours abandoned and betrayed his most fundamental responsibilities to uphold the Constitution and keep the nation safe while the Capitol was being sacked and his own Vice President seriously at risk – not

to mention the men and women of Congress and the Capitol Police – is deeply disorienting. The fact America’s top governing authority figure failed, for over 3 hours, to put a stop to the rioting, despite the chorus of pleas of those closest to him (cf., January 6th Report), is simply unfathomable to his followers; they have invented alternative realities. Through cynicism, perhaps, or an adaptation of conspiracy theories (‘the system is rigged!’), the disaffected American citizen begins to find their way. For others, what is needed to better assure the upholding of democratic norms seems unclear, especially given Trump’s continued influence in American political life and the distinct possibility of his re-election in 2024.

We conclude this portion of our discussion with yet another analogy from Kuhn – the need for the ‘rules to tighten’ when paradigm shifts occur. According to Kuhn, this has been true throughout human history. One need look no further than Plato’s Allegory of the Cave to consider how people respond to claims their view of reality is wrong: ‘Men would say of him that up he went and down he came without his eyes; and that it was better not to even think of ascending...’ (Plato, 1942: p. 401). Kuhn wrote about a felt need for rules to be tightened ‘whenever paradigms or models are felt to be insecure’ (Kuhn, 2012: p. 48). The unravelling of established ways of thinking and acting that paradigm shifts generate may cause deep disturbances, prompting the desire for the ensuing anxiety to be managed by a ‘strong man’ leadership approach. Thus we have: ‘Make America Great Again’; ‘Stop the Steal’; ‘1776.’

Part II: The microscopic view

The dynamics of an insurrectionist movement

This part of our analysis of January 6th and its immediate aftermath centers on three specific dynamics we have identified regarding how individual and collective agency was given effect that day. We argue these derive from the beliefs, norms and values comprising the MAGA worldview that binds Trump and his followers together in a shared social identity (Haslam et al., 2022; Reicher et al., 2018). The first dynamic pertains to the ways in which the individual and collective agency of Trump’s followers is *compromised*. This arises, we will argue, because the MAGA worldview *unfettered* followers’ individual and collective agency from constraints more established (and ‘establishment’) alternatives—commonly held beliefs, norms, and values about how democracies should function—typically have on citizens. Freed from such considerations, Trump’s followers were instead informed by a MAGA worldview sanctioning their use of illegitimate means, in particular actions lacking truthfulness, legality or morality, and their pursuit of illegitimate ends, namely seeking to overthrow democratic rule through violence. The third aspect of our argument pertains to Trump. We contend that in response to the attempted insurrection a MAGA worldview enabled him to rebuke and repudiate his followers and deny his capacity to influence them, and yet still not breach the bonds of loyalty they had for him. We characterize this as a *masking* dynamic regarding Trump’s agency, empowering him to do whatever he deems necessary without risking his followers’ faith in him.

The discussion proceeds as follows. Firstly, we outline the basic tenets of the social identity theory, its offshoot social identity theory of leadership (hereafter SITOL), and our understanding of agency. This provides the theoretical underpinning of our subsequent analysis. We then explore how SITOL has already been used to examine the events of January 6th, arguing there remains a need to deepen our understanding of how the norms governing the MAGA movement shaped its’ adherents exercise of agency, which we then offer. Thereafter we set out our analysis of the dynamics of agency in relation to the attempted insurrection and its immediate aftermath, before offering some concluding comments.

Social identity theory, leadership, and agency

SITOL has its roots in social identity theory. The latter explains individual identity derives from a mix of personal characteristics, close relationships, and the influence of the social groups to which someone belongs (Gaffney and Hogg, 2023; Tajfel and Turner, 1979). Individuals typically have bonds to multiple social groups, via ties such as nationality, gender, religious, political, or sporting affiliations. How significant any given group is to an individual, how boundaries between groups are drawn and how out-groups are regarded can vary enormously amongst individuals and between groups. In any given situation particular aspects of someone's social identity may become especially salient (Gaffney and Hogg, 2023; Tajfel and Turner, 1979).

Social identity theory holds that whatever the specifics may be, the particular values, beliefs, norms, and concerns of a person's most important in-groups become enmeshed into their own world view and sense of self, providing influential guidance for how they think and act (Gaffney and Hogg, 2023; Tajfel and Turner, 1979). In-group members opinions are normally seen as more important and trustworthy than those of out-groups, and communication typically flows more openly between members of the same in-group, serving to reinforce communal bonds, enable shared sense-making, and maintain group norms. The more someone identifies with a particular group the more they will come to align their beliefs, behaviors and sense of self with those which are prototypical of that group, a phenomenon known as depersonalization. Hence where someone identifies strongly with a given group its norms become their prescriptive guides for how to think and act (Gaffney and Hogg, 2023). Overall, a person's social identity plays an important role in how they understand themselves, other people, and reality more generally — meaning it also has significance for how they then exercise their agency.

Building on these understandings, SITOL posits an individual comes to be seen as a leader when members of their in-group regard them as exemplifying its shared beliefs, values, norms, and aspirations such that they are, firstly, considered not only to be 'one of us' but regarded as an exemplary, 'prototypical' group member (Haslam et al., 2011; Haslam and Reicher, 2016; Hogg, 2001; Reicher et al., 2018). Importantly, too, they are seen as helping address the group's concerns and advance its goals such that they are thought to be 'doing it for us'. Leaders are thus those seen to be aligned with, motivated by, and capable of advancing the group's interests — something deeply entwined with an individual's sense of self — and thus deserving of the support followership entails. Sustaining this demands ongoing efforts by leaders. They must actively craft for followers a sense of who 'we' are and what 'we' seek to achieve, practices termed identity entrepreneurship. And, they must create experiences and results, be they tangible or psychic in nature, to enable group members to feel their shared beliefs, values, norms, aspirations and interests are advancing due to the leader's efforts, practices termed identity impresarioship (Haslam et al., 2011; Haslam and Reicher, 2016; Reicher et al., 2018). By shaping in these various ways how followers perceive reality, leaders thus influence how followers exercise their agency.

SITOL also offers insights into the causes and effects of toxic leadership in ways that transcend the normal focus on individual psychology (Haslam et al., 2011, 2019). Specifically, it highlights that in-group norms fostering open debate and challenge of the leader's views and actions are typically weak or absent in such cases. Instead, toxic leaders foster norms within the group of blind loyalty and compliance with the leader's wishes. This may extend to legitimating authoritarian responses to dissent, including punishment or even banishment, or fostering norms in which followers exert peer pressure to maintain the leader's power and the group's unity and identity (Haslam et al., 2011, 2019). A further feature of toxic leadership that a SITOL lens helps to reveal is the fostering of norms of hostility toward out-groups, portraying them as posing some form of

economic, cultural and/or existential threat to the leader's in-group but which they, the leader, can address (Obaidi et al., 2022; Portice and Reicher, 2018). All these dynamics have potentially significant deleterious implications for how followers exercise their agency in demonstrating their allegiance to the group and its leader.

Overall, SITOL brings into focal attention the powerful psychological bond that can form between leaders and followers and amongst followers, how this operates simultaneously at an individual and group level, and how these influences shape followers' sense of self, perceptions, and actions – their identity and their agency, in other words. Of further interest for our analysis is that it highlights that the *particular* intra- and inter-group norms, values, and goals that a leader 'crafts' function to enable or impede certain possibilities being considered desirable or not by that in-group. Consequently, it is the *specific* beliefs, norms, values, and goals a leader enlists their followers into supporting, as part of their group membership and their role as follower, that influences how those followers then exercise their agency in meaningful ways.

The notion of individual agency — which has strong associations with the concept of free will — is a fundamental concern in our analysis of January 6th. While many definitions exist, we rely on understanding agency as being an individual's capacity to act of their own volition, rather than being forced to do something against their will. We take it to be to be present when, either at an individual or group level, we see intention, the capacity to act, and a causal connection between intentions, capacity to act and actions (Ciulla, 2017). Accordingly, we do not question its presence in what took place on January 6th, rather our analysis shows three ways in which its exercise was impaired.

Social identity theory of leadership and January 6th

Social identity theory applied to both leadership and followership offers much in explaining January 6th and its aftermath. Indeed, Haslam et al. (2022) have specifically examined these events using SITOL and posit a 'dual agency' model comprising both identity leadership by Trump and engaged followership. They argue on that day Trump skillfully deployed the core practices of identity leadership. This includes, for example, characterizing the MAGA movement as comprising 'amazing patriots' who have 'truth and justice on our side', and a 'deep and enduring love for America in our hearts', reinforcing followers' sense of shared social identity. He articulated norms and goals that would be understood by supporters to serve the group's interests, to 'be strong' and 'demand the Congress do the right thing' in order to 'Stop the steal'. And, he set out in broad terms what they needed to do to advance the group's goals – to 'walk down to the Capitol', 'make your voices heard' and 'take back our country' (Naylor, 2021). Such messaging bolstered the pre-existing bond between Trump and his followers, ensuring they once again embraced a sense of 'us' and understood in broad terms what was needed to achieve the group's goals. His followers then responded in enthusiastic and creative ways to "work towards" (Haslam et al., 2022) what they perceived their leader to be proposing.

Haslam et al. (2022) conclude that the events of January 6th were co-produced by both Trump and his followers and, hence, that his denial of responsibility is implausible. Instead, his speech constructed a version of reality in which the consequential actions taken by his followers could be understood by them as both existentially necessary – to 'stop the steal' – and morally justified. They argue "rather than eclipsing or sublimating their agency, he framed and unleashed it" (p. 11).

In a recent 'preprint', Ntontis et al. (2023) have also drawn on SITOL to examine how Trump's speech that day rhetorically "constituted advocacy for, and legitimation of, violent action" (p. 10). They highlight how Trump's speech constructed his followers as a morally virtuous ingroup whose existence was threatened by the actions of an immoral outgroup. He invoked a moral duty for group

members to protect the group by eliminating that threat through repeated references to issues related to the group's shared social identity. They contend that in making these links Trump enabled the violence that followed, even though he did not explicitly direct it, noting also that this kind of rhetorical framing is commonplace in instances of toxic leadership.

We think both of these analyses offer useful insights into the processes and dynamics at play between Trump and his followers on January 6th. However, neither focus deeply on the core beliefs, norms and values that characterize and govern Trump's MAGA movement, nor how these shaped the exercise of agency on that day and in its immediate aftermath, hence our analysis below extends our understanding of January 6th by doing that.

The MAGA worldview

The character of the shared social identity which bonds Trump and his followers comprises a set of values, beliefs, and norms that we term the MAGA worldview. This affords its adherents a frame for sense-making that offers a powerful guide to action, shaping what is seen as important, desirable and valid. As with any worldview, it is not fixed but open to continuous adaptation. While not exclusively controlled by Trump, meaning his followers contribute to its ongoing construction, what he role models to them by way of his own statements and actions strongly influences MAGA worldview norms as to what is considered acceptable or desirable conduct.

The essence of the MAGA worldview lies in the name itself – Make America Great Again – and the inextricable ties this has with whatever its originator, Donald Trump, does or seeks to do. The core proposition of the MAGA worldview is thus that America was once great but is not now so, due to reasons articulated by Trump, and that this problematic state of affairs can only be resolved by Trump securing authority to do what he deems necessary (see, e.g., [Trump, 2016](#)). In adopting this worldview as their own, adherents can thus see themselves as part of a movement dedicated to resurrecting America's greatness, something understood as being historically significant, deeply patriotic, and profoundly moral. In so doing, however, they also cede extensive power to Trump to know best what ought to be done and how. In rendering themselves dependent upon him in this way they abandon independent critical thought and substitute it with blind faith in Trump.

In elaborating on the core ideas of a MAGA worldview Trump repeatedly talks up his own abilities and goals, characterizing his supporters as 'true patriots' joined with him in bravely standing up to those whom he blames for this current state of affairs and for impeding his efforts to resolve them (e.g. [Trump, 2016, 2020](#)). Commonly presented by Trump as key enemies — not just opponents — are the 'radical' 'woke' Democrats, migrants, the 'fake news' media, 'big tech', China, the UN, the WHO, and, of course, the 'swamp', broadly meaning any individual or institution associated with more conventional ways of governing that emphasize the rule of law, due process, norms of civility and integrity and the value of facts. Anyone who criticizes Trump's goals or methods can be added to this list of enemies at will.

The MAGA worldview rests on a core in-versus out-group framing in which there are stark and highly antagonistic differences between its members and its enemies, hence fear, anger, grievance, and resentment feature strongly in the emotional tenor of a MAGA worldview ([Joosse and Zelinsky, 2022](#)). While Trump and his followers claim to be righteous, their enemies are believed to disrespect American values, ignore legitimate concerns, and pose economic, cultural, and existential threats to America (e.g. [Trump, 2016, 2020](#)). This framing results in three significant effects.

Firstly, it legitimates the necessity of absolute loyalty to Trump by followers to help counteract the threats those enemies pose. Trump thus repeatedly praises those whose actions accord with his

wishes but decries as unpatriotic those who challenge him. Secondly, this framing legitimates the demonization and dehumanization of his enemies, something Trump has actively role-modelled to his followers on many occasions. In the 2016 campaign, for example, he depicted Mexicans as drug dealers, criminals, and rapists (BBC, 2016), and Democratic rival Hilary Clinton as a criminal, encouraging his supporters to repeatedly chant ‘lock her up’. Rhetoric that dehumanizes others and portrays them as a threat is identified by those who study genocides as necessary precursors to actual violence (Dangerous Speech Project, 2021). Hence this contributes to the third effect of this framing, namely a set of reference points from which violence can more readily be portrayed as not just morally acceptable but even morally desirable.

On this point, Trump’s own role modelling is again important: he repeatedly flirted with legitimating violence well before the events of January 6th. For example, following the 2017 Charlottesville white nationalist rally where a counter-protestor was killed Trump implied a moral equivalence between the groups, arguing there were ‘very fine people on both sides’ and that blame for the violence could be attributed to both sides (Klein, 2018). Another instance of flirtation occurred in September 2020 when he told the Proud Boys, a far-right group known for its violent tactics, to “stand back and stand by” just a month prior to the presidential election (Reid and Valasik, 2020). They took him at his word, subsequently playing a key role in the violence on January 6th, resulting in their leader and three of his senior ‘lieutenants’ being convicted of seditious conspiracy (Lowell, 2023). These examples show, then, that even prior to Jan 6th, various of Trump’s comments conveyed to his followers the impression violence may be justified, legitimate or even desirable provided it is in pursuit of a cause he endorses. In so doing he fostered this norm as part of the MAGA worldview.

Two further key features of the MAGA worldview we wish to highlight are, firstly, its fundamental disregard for established understandings of truth, facts, and science. Such views are actively role modelled by Trump and have long noted as key features of his leadership (Kessler et al., 2021). What many commentators fail to highlight, but which a SITOL lens helps surface, is that to follow a leader engaging in such behavior is by and large to accept those same behaviors as valid and even desirable. Secondly and relatedly, a MAGA worldview entails a mistrust and contempt for those emphasizing the importance of due process, the rule of law, and conventional ways of governing in a democracy. It does this by framing such considerations as a mere tactic designed to impede the MAGA movement from achieving its goals, thus undermining the legitimacy and validity of these established norms and institutions (Trump, 2016, 2020). Again, these are matters role modelled by Trump but which a SITOL lens highlights are supported by his followers. As a substitute to truth, facts, science, convention, due process, and the rule of law, norms that typically influence citizens who consider themselves law-abiding patriots, a MAGA worldview instead offers a permissive norm: say or do that which you can get away with provided only that those statements or actions can be characterized as being in service of the MAGA worldview and its goals.

In important ways a MAGA worldview is no more than a Trump branded variant of contemporary populist authoritarian movements (Faroughi et al., 2019; Goethals, 2018; Mudde, 2021; Norris and Inglehart, 2019). Key commonalities lie in the hostile frame of reference in which the interests of ‘the people’, who are ‘good’, are said to be threatened and undermined by the ‘elites’ and those whom they favor, who are ‘bad’, simultaneously provoking and justifying anger, grievance and resentment. A nostalgic yearning for the past — when supporters of the leader had more security and privilege relative to the current day — is evoked, along with the implicit promise that the leader will secure a return to those glory days via their superior insights and ‘strong’ leadership. Grandiose promises are likewise *de rigueur* for such leaders, but are rarely delivered upon. But, regardless of

the rational, moral, and fact-based critiques one can make of such movements, the emotional and psychological hold Trump and fellow populist leaders have on their followers, and the manner in which they can orchestrate collective action, must be faced for it is that which unleashes and shapes their individual and collective agency.

The MAGA worldview and agency compromised, unfettered and masked

Having summarized some key beliefs, norms and values shaping the MAGA worldview constituting the shared social identity bonding Trump's followers to him, we turn now to its implications for agency. Drawing on the above foundations above we argue, firstly, that the events of January 6th were underpinned by a MAGA worldview which *compromised* the agency of Trump's followers through expectations of unquestioning loyalty to him, along with their suspension of critical thought and their refusal or inability to treat as real independently verifiable facts. In effect, then, we posit Trump's followers were not agentic in the fullest, morally desirable, and rational sense of the notion. This arose because they were in such thrall to a liar and his lies their capacity for independent, critical thinking was materially eroded. This saw them dismiss objectively verifiable facts of great salience to the situation at hand and instead exercise their individual and collective agency pursuing a goal rooted in falsehoods and fantasy. The quality of their agency was compromised such that they became fools intent on pursuing a fool's errand.

We argue, simultaneously, that arising from their adoption of a MAGA worldview the individual and collective agency of Trump's followers was also *unfettered* from the influence of structural forces that would normally have inhibited people from acting as they did that day. As noted, the MAGA worldview entails the rejection of conventional notions and standards for establishing truthfulness, instead whatever Trump says becomes the arbiter of what is important and trustworthy information. Efforts to uphold long established norms, institutions and processes enabling the rule of law and the peaceful transfer of power are interpreted as illegitimate tactics deployed by its enemies. Active distrust in the electoral system, the judicial system and fact-based journalism is fostered, hence even when these sources repeatedly affirmed the election was not, as a matter of verifiable fact, stolen, they were not believed. Further, Trump's strategic ambiguity and earlier flirtations regarding the use of violence to achieve political goals primed his supporters to realize its use was not clearly out of bounds. Indeed, on that very day he urged them to 'fight like hell', thus rhetorically invoking violence as a legitimate means to 'stop the steal', even if he did not mean that as a literal instruction to his followers. Hence with all these factors at play the 'structural' forces normally impeding citizens from exercising their agency in unlawful and violent ways could not hold. Rather, the MAGA worldview facilitated individual and collective agency to become unfettered from such constraints. Trump's followers thus became dangerous fools, intent on pursuing a dangerously foolish errand, using foolishly dangerous means.

We argue, then the cumulative impact of these dynamics meant the individual and collective agency of Trump's followers was compromised in psychologically and morally meaningful ways. Simultaneously, and ironically, this left them unfettered to act as hyper-agentially as they did, resulting in an event of historical significance such as is normally only attributed to leaders - but for which the ostensible leader denies all responsibility.

The third dynamic we have thus identified at play, particularly evident in the immediate aftermath of January 6th, is the manner in which Trump was able to *mask* his agency through recourse to the beliefs, values, and norms of the MAGA worldview. Trump, of course, frequently overstates his own agency, making grandiose claims about his achievements and abilities that fly in the face of reality but which, nonetheless, reinforce to followers why he deserves their support (e.g. [Trump, 2016](#),

2020). However, we argue it is notable his efforts in the immediate aftermath of the storming of the Capitol to distance himself from what took place - tweeting to his followers 'no violence' and 'go home' (Trump, 2021a) and then, the next day, condemning what took place as a 'heinous attack' about which he and 'all Americans' felt 'outraged' (Trump, 2021b) - do not appear to have breached his followers' trust and faith in him. This, we think, is because a MAGA worldview involves accepting Trump may do whatever he deems necessary in response to his enemies' efforts to bring him down. Accordingly, we posit Trump's followers believed he was not expressing his true feelings and beliefs when he condemned their actions or downplayed his influence as their leader. Rather a MAGA worldview enabled them to understand these as necessary steps to ward off his, and their, detractors. It facilitated and condoned the masking of Trump's agency when doing so served his needs, thereby giving him license to do or say whatever he deemed expedient and not risk losing his followers support. For Trump, being also in thrall to the MAGA worldview, this masking amplified the already compromised and unfettered nature of his agency even further, such that he could be the most dangerous of men pursuing the most dangerous of goals via the most dangerous of means and yet still retain his dangerously foolish followers' admiration and unwavering support.

Overall, our 'microscopic' lens identifies what we have conceptualized as three key dynamics of individual and collective agency which find inspiration and validation in the beliefs, values and norms that are fundamental to the MAGA worldview holding Trump and his followers together in a shared social identity. We argue these dynamics were central to the events of January 6th and its immediate aftermath. They entailed followers whose individual and collective agency was *compromised*, through a lack of critical thinking and blind loyalty to Trump while, simultaneously, that agency was *unfettered* from the normal constraints that deter citizens from acting to harm their nation's sacred institutions. They also entailed a leader enabled to say or do whatever he considered necessary to *mask* his similarly compromised and unfettered agency such that, while his influence on followers was significant, he could simultaneously claim otherwise, even to the point of ostensibly rebuking and repudiating them knowing that, in so doing, he would not risk losing their support. Only a desperate, courageous, and chaotic effort to resist the unlawful and violent expression of these forces prevented them from successfully overthrowing the American government.

Conclusion

The analysis offered here identifies a number of underlying causes that we contend gave rise to the January 6th insurrection. Deploying a telescopic lens, we draw on Kuhn's insights into the nature of paradigm shifts and the anxiety they induce noting, firstly, that Trump's MAGA movement has emerged as a response to perceived and actual threats to traditional sources of income, power, and status. These threats derive from a diverse range of shifts in American society, such as globalization, global warming, demographic changes and demands for greater gender and racial equality. We argue the paradigm-shifting nature of these developments trigger an anxiety that is foundational to Trumpism, birthing a movement in which Trump's promise is that he is the only one who can 'make America great again'. Believing this, his followers enter into a relationship characterized by what Bion theorizes as a basic assumption of dependency by a group on its leader. This cedes excessive influence over his followers to Trump, creating a foundation upon which Trump's loss to Biden is experienced as being unbearable, hence they credulously accept his 'Big Lie'. All these dynamics set the stage for January 6th, where Trump himself unleashed a paradigm shifting event when, as sitting President and Commander in Chief, he implored his followers to 'fight like hell' in order to 'stop the steal' and then stood by for hours while they violently sought to do just that. This searing betrayal of an American president's most fundamental duties, to uphold the Constitution and protect the nation

from harm, shatters trust and confidence in the norms and institutions underpinning American democracy. It creates a deeply disorienting experience, akin to what happens when first trying on inverted eyeglasses, and gives rise to vastly divergent accounts of what happened, akin to how different people see the famous duck/rabbit illustration. At its core, January 6th thus reflects Kuhn's insight that in the face of paradigm shifts some seek a 'tightening of the rules' in an effort to stave off such change. This objective gives rise to the desire for the 'strong man' style of leadership upon whom followers are dependent and which Trump offers his supporters. However, our telescopic analysis also shows that while January 6th was itself a paradigm-shifting event, it also constitutes an expression of the core dynamics animating the MAGA movement. Because of that, what happened that day cannot be dismissed as a mere aberration.

Our microscopic lens further reinforces this concern. Drawing on social identity theory, its offshoot in regard to leadership, and considerations of agency, it extends our interrogation into the forces animating January 6th, focusing particularly on the key beliefs, value and norms that comprise the MAGA worldview. For adherents, this worldview renders them as patriots striving for the noble aim of making America great again, something thought achievable only if Trump gets what he wants. It demands unquestioning loyalty to Trump, demonizes and dehumanizes its 'enemies' and, as far back as 2017, accepts Trump's flirtations implying politically motivated lawlessness and violence may sometimes be legitimate and even morally desirable. It is a worldview entailing a disregard for truth, facts, and science, and is mistrustful and contemptuous toward those seeking to uphold conventional norms of liberal democracy. In these many ways the MAGA worldview compromises its followers' capacity to exercise their individual and collective agency in ways that reflect reason and morality. Simultaneously, it unfetters them from the normal constraints deterring citizens from attacking legitimate forms of authority. Further, it permits Trump to mask his agency when so doing serves his purposes, in order to avoid being held to account for his actions. While we argue an understanding of the MAGA worldview and the dynamics of agency to which it gives rise helps to explain the causes of January 6th and its immediate aftermath, what is more concerning is that these matters remain to this day key features of the MAGA movement. Accordingly, we contend it would be naïve to regard the events of January 6th as a one-off 'bug'. Rather, a predilection for politically motivated violence and lawlessness are 'design features' of Trump's MAGA movement, meaning he and his followers pose a continuing threat to democracy and the rule of law in America.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Notes

1. Trump fits Tourish's definition of 'darkly transformational' leader. See, for example, Tourish's comparison between the attributes of transformational leadership and cult leaders (Tourish, 2013: p 30).

2. To be clear, while Kuhn's primary interest was scientific paradigms shifts, which are normally understood as insights that bring us closer to a true and accurate understanding of reality, our assumption is that societal paradigm shifts are not inevitably more progressive or truthful. That issue we see as being contingent on the specific character of the shift that is made.

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