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Resentment, Online Living, and Sacred Soldiers in Trumpist America: Toward Understanding the Emergence of a Populist Cult

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This is an exploration of historical, political, and psychological processes that enable Donald Trump to attain and remain a powerful political force in the United States and maintain the allegiance of so many adherents, even while his unethical and illegal acts are in public view. Using a hermeneutic, cultural history approach, I employ insights drawn from historical sources, social psychology, pop culture, and studies about religious cults. The effort is to understand not only the psychological experience of Trump's followers but also something about the psychological life of all Americans, and by doing so sketch out in broad terms the current 21st-century self and the cultural terrain that brought this new self to light.

Public Significance Statement
Domestically and internationally, far-right authoritarianism is on the rise. A populist movement led by Donald Trump has gained a large following that threatens democratic institutions. This interdisciplinary study explores how and why followers join Trump's movement and suggests a solution. Resentment, historical antecedents, identity issues, and the use of electronic media contributed to a new way of being that enables the rise of Trump's populism.

Keywords: populism, hermeneutics, cultural history, the self, democracy

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Americans are living through an extremely troubling time, marked by loud grievances, bizarre conspiracy theories, intense political division, threats against democracy, seditious acts, and explicit calls to civil war. Former President Trump's continuing refusal to admit defeat in the 2020 election led to a calculated, violent effort to remain in office and an ongoing effort to capture the electoral machinery in ways that are intended to ensure Republican victories in 2022 and 2024. Trump has succeeded in achieving widespread public denial of the truth of the 2020 election. By maintaining the loyalty of the Republican base, he has been able to achieve near-total control of the Republican Party apparatus going into the next electoral cycle. This article examines the cultural terrain upon which these extraordinary developments have taken place.

The Need for a Hermeneutic Approach

In this section, I discuss the interdisciplinary methodology employed in this interpretive endeavor, drawn primarily from hermeneutics, cultural studies, and cultural history (e.g., Artz & Murphey, 2000; Frie, 2018; Furedi, 2004; Hall, 1988; Hunt, 1989; F. C. Richardson et al., 1999; Sass, 1988, 1992; Sugarman, 2015; Taylor, 1989). I also employ methods developed in self-psychology (e.g., Kohut, 1976, 1985; Strozier, 1976), critical social psychology (e.g., Gergen, 1973, 1985; Gergen & Gergen, 1984;

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Morawski, 1984; Sampson, 1978, 1988), relational psychoanalysis (Dimen, 2011; Harris & Botticelli, 2010; Layton, 2020; Orbach, 2008; Stern, 1991, 2010), and humanistic psychology (Fromm, 2001).

Different kinds of research procedures fit with different kinds of research topics. Frequently, however, psychologists dismiss important topics from consideration because much of mainstream psychology is dedicated to the ideology of scientism and its contention that researchers must maintain neutrality by following procedures claimed to be objective. Scientism is an ideology maintaining that all human sciences, including the social sciences, must adopt a physical science framework for research. This means all prejudgments must be "bracketed off." In psychology, scientism mandates that the discipline avoids research models that might appear to be too political and therefore unscientific, which not incidentally might threaten psychology's social status and financial opportunities. Ironically, this stance itself could be considered a bias left unbracketed. As a result, supervisors, consultants, editors, and evaluators in research-granting institutions tend to favor research procedures that make it difficult to study the broad, sweeping topics that are complex, contentious, and yet crucial to understanding the psychological terrain of our current sociopolitical world.

Hermeneutics, with its emphasis on history and interpretation, provides the tools for the study of culture that scientistic psychology cannot provide. It is an extended philosophical argument against scientism and its necessary philosophical precursor, Cartesianism (see, e.g., Bordo, 1987). Philosophers Heidegger (1927/1962) and Gadamer (1960/1989) wrote what are thought to be the foundations for ontological or philosophical hermeneutics. Since that time, others have contributed to the subject, such as philosophers Taylor (1989) and Bernstein (1983) and psychologists such as Stern (1991, 1997, 2010), Slife and Williams (1995), F. C. Richardson et al. (1999), Martin and Sugarman (1999), and Frie (2018). I have also written about the movement (Cushman, 1995, 2019), and in particular suggested that a hermeneutic cultural history fits well with the social critiques of our time (Cushman, 2020). Most recently, my former students (Cushman, 2022) applied hermeneutic ideas to psychological research and clinical practice.

Heidegger's hermeneutic contributions offer a complex philosophy that explains why culture and history are formative elements of human life, and why the processes of everyday linguistic and textual interpretation are essential to human perception and social interaction. In hermeneutic methodology, human subjectivity is understood to be coconstituted by the social realm and human biochemistry and that the two cannot be separated (e.g., F. C. Richardson et al., 1999). The attempt to do so is at bottom a political act with political consequences (Cushman, 2019). Thus, a hermeneutically informed research approach should historically situate both the social world that constitutes human subjects and the research approach that is being used—a difficult but highly rewarding task. It opens up a multitude of topics that bring richness and depth to cultural history research.

Gadamer's critique of "method," for example, leads to studying the history that frames theory and research and can help us understand the moral and political consequences of scientism and proceduralism in psychology (see, e.g., Cushman, 2015b, 2019; Stern, 2013; Walls, 2012), managed care in psychotherapy and medicine (Cushman & Gilford, 2000), fundamentalisms in religion and politics, and originalism in constitutional law.

A hermeneutic approach directs research toward the constitutive nature of culture and history in shaping ways of being (i.e., the self) in particular societies in particular historical eras. Thus, hermeneuticists look with suspicion on research that claims to reveal universal laws of human being (see, e.g., F. C. Richardson et al., 1999; Slife & Williams, 1995), which always has been one of the major projects of research in mainstream psychology. Attending to the cultural surround, then, can render more understandable seemingly strange, bizarre, even inexplicable philosophical and political theories, healing practices, and individual behaviors.

The goal of this article is to provide a hermeneutic account of the social world that brings to light not only Trump's behavior, but the subservience and "true believer" inclinations of his followers. In this undertaking, I am informed by the principle of what is called the hermeneutic circle—that the individual parts cannot be understood without understanding the whole, and the whole cannot be understood without understanding the individual parts. It is a

circularity that has no final end point: human understanding is not a linear enterprise, and it is always uncertain and incomplete (F. C. Richardson et al., 1999).

When interpreting a text hermeneutically, we do best by vigilantly questioning a text, using (and questioning) one's tradition's standards of textual evaluation, drawing from one's current understandings about the good, and recognizing the influence of practices and moral understandings of other cultures. Gadamer explained why it is counterproductive to attempt to understand a text or a person by attempting to penetrate into the putative secret interior of the author or person, and thus his/her emotions and motivations (i.e., the claim of empathy). Instead, he advocated interpreting a text by first attempting to understand the historical, cultural context that brought it to light.

The hermeneutic view of human understanding is obviously fraught with difficulties. The success of hermeneutic research depends on persuasiveness created from a collection of believable data, a reasonable and understandable style of writing, and a persuasive philosophical argument that has been compared, contrasted, and tested by the opposing arguments of others, and modified accordingly (see Stigliano, 1989). Importantly, successful hermeneutic research also depends on the openness and honest intentions of the reader.

Facing up to the fragility and uncertainty of those processes takes courage. Sometimes, we succeed for a while and sometimes we fail. But there is grave danger in pretending that a few among us possess a privileged truth that exists within an unchanging original source (either religious, psychological, or political), comforting as that fantasy may be. Instead, hermeneutics calls us to have the courage to live "in the politics of uncertainty" (Cushman, 2015a, 2019).

The Sociopolitical Moment

The deceitfulness and cynicism of Trump aligned politicians and far-right pundits have been the subject of much commentary. Here, my attention is directed toward the enthusiastic involvement and true-believer characteristics of so many of Trump's followers. Sixty-six percent of Republicans and 36% of White Americans believe that the 2020 election was stolen; 30% of Republicans believe that "patriots" may have to resort to violence "in order to save our country"; and 18% of Americans believe that "the government, media, and financial worlds in the United States are controlled by a group of Satan-worshipping pedophiles who run a global child sex-trafficking operation" (Public Religion Research Institute, 2021).

Why are so many people embracing Trump's wild accusations, delusional theories, and authoritarian, militaristic plans aimed at undermining our most important democratic processes? Why do so many people uncritically believe the media and other public figures who perpetuate those falsehoods, build their personal identity around them and commit to them and their cause? Why, in short, are so many Americans susceptible to the radical authoritarian populism of the Trump movement?

I will begin by discussing various forms of precarity and a kind of revanchism of status reflected in the moral, social, and political concerns of Trump's followers. These include especially significant sectors of the White population who express racist-inspired fears about their "replacement" by people of color or Jews, combined with middle-class status anxiety or "fear of falling" (Ehrenreich, 1989), and in general feelings of being ignored, ridiculed, and cheated by so-called elites in government, education, and the media. These fears are rooted in both the deep and enduring racism of American society along with structural changes in the economy over the last 40 years in the United States, specifically the transformation in the latest stage of capitalism, neoliberalism (e.g., Binkley, 2011; Harvey, 2007; Sugarman, 2015). Interestingly, might the profession of psychology—historically anxious about its status as a legitimate (hard) science and currently experiencing its own precarity—more rigorously guard the boundaries of what is regarded as valid research methodology and topics?

It is also important to take into account how individuals experiencing precarity or downward mobility employ psychological tools of self-image management (Hales, 1985). Such tools, however, are not employed independently by detached individuals. Self-image is shaped through strategies employed by Trump, other Trumpist Republicans, and the ideological narratives supporting the Make America Great Again (MAGA) movement in the media and online. I am suggesting that current social conditions for millions of Americans instill a hunger for a new, revitalized political mythology. Right-wing populist

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narratives attempt to satiate that hunger by providing meaning and value. These strategies amount to a form of thought reform techniques (Lifton, 1961; Singer & Lalich, 1995). Among other strategies, Trumpist political myths situate reformulated identities within putative American traditions such as the South's "Lost Cause" (Grandin, 2019; H. C. Richardson, 2020), the freedom and individualism associated with the American Frontier Myth (Grandin, 2019; Lepore, 2018; Slotkin, 1985), and a more recent fundamentalist, Christian nationalist ideology.

These and related strategies, I will suggest, are facilitated by everyday immersion in contemporary electronic communications affecting participants' sense of what it is to be a person, what humans are capable of, and what humans should act like and strive for (see, e.g., Brockman, 2011; Carr, 2010; Kellner, 1990; Pomerantsev, 2019; Postman, 1985; Turkle, 1995, 2011; Watkins, 2009). Internet access and computer algorithms have also amplified political divisions and intensified partisan hostility (see Edsall, 2022).

My approach here is to understand how these forces shape what hermeneuticists call the self—that is, the predominant way of being of a historical era. At the beginning of the 21st century, Peter Gilford and I (Cushman & Gilford, 1999, 2000) suggested the self of the early 21st century is changing from the deep, empty self of the previous century (Cushman, 1990, 1995) into what could be understood as the flattened, multiple self (see also Jacobson, 1997; Orange, 2009). I will suggest how this emerging way of being has facilitated membership into Trump's political movement (note, however, the aim of this article is not to interpret Trump's followers—and more recently the entire Republican Party—as unusually disturbed individuals suffering from anomalous psychiatric symptoms. The approach is to understand the behavior of his followers and the historical and psychological dynamics that shape their behavior as reflecting the broader sweep of our current social world. We reduce membership in Trump's political movement to individual pathology at our peril).

Provisional Interpretive Categories

These dimensions of authoritarian populism are essential points of departure. Yet, as suggested above, we must still probe more deeply into what motivates those who embrace and identify with the populist leader. My attempt to understand why so many American have embraced Trump and his lies about the election and even support the use of violence is advanced through four interpretative categories: (a) resentment, (b) historical antecedents of U.S. authoritarianism, (c) the development and psychological maintenance of a true-believer identity, and (d) the effects of online living on the current 21st-century way of being. Each of the four themes and their relationship to the question that animates this study are described and discussed in some detail.

The themes are important not only because they describe something about the psychological life of Trump's followers, but particularly because they describe something about the psychological life of all of us, and thus reveal important aspects of our current sociocultural terrain. I am arguing that Trump's followers and their behavior are not simply the product of individual psychological anomalies; they are reflections of key dimensions of the larger social world in which our politics takes shape.

Resentment

One of the most powerful impressions one receives from listening to or reading about Trump's followers is a sense of grievance, resentment, a contempt for those who are responsible for ignoring, belittling, or economically subjugating them, and a wish for revenge and deliverance through the exercise of power by their strongman leader. They embody a sense of being cheated, displaced, overlooked, left behind, and replaced. They think they have found a leader who understands them, cares about them, guides them, and will save them. They are angry, casting about for meaning, and they stand ready to fight for what they think is their rightful place in the world. They might have a vague sense of who or what groups are responsible for their plight, but they are supremely ripe for being pointed in a certain direction. In fact, before the leader ever articulates it for them, American traditions of racism, antisemitism, anti-intellectualism, anti-communism, misogyny, and homophobia predispose MAGA followers to blame and project hatred and aggression in those directions.

How did this sense of injury and its accompanying anger come about? There is no simple answer yet one must certainly begin with the

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decades-long blocked or downward mobility experienced by American workers and the accompanying decimation of communities across America's various "rust belts." Factories closed, jobs disappeared, and downtowns shuttered and emptied. These devastations were the direct consequence of the globalized outsourcing of manufacturing, assembly, and labor brought about by the economic and political transformations wrought by neoliberalism (Binkley, 2011; Harvey, 2007). The growing gap between the victims of globalization and the beneficiaries of the tech-driven restructuring of the American economy added to the despair, humiliation, and resentful feelings of being left behind. The newly dispossessed became susceptible to a populist leader who voiced their plight, spouted vitriol at elite enemies, and promised redemption.

Along with the economic transformations, neoliberalism also reinforces and extends the culture of commodification of capitalist social relations, viewing everything in the social terrain—activities, events, and people—as commodified objects (Sugarman, 2015). In a neoliberal world, personal worth is increasingly assessed through an individual's exchange value. Those without high-paying, high-prestige jobs or careers or marriages are devalued and blamed in the larger society, adding another dimension to the mix of feelings contributing to resentment.

The transformation of people into commodities where worth is measured by exchange value is accompanied by the imperative to market and sell oneself. Selling is thought to require the creation and maintenance of a personal brand (Hickinbottom-Brawn, 2013). When the presentation of self has been transformed into a brand, one's sense of self-worth becomes a reflection of how successfully one's sales campaign has been conducted. Being unmarried or divorced, being unemployed or in a low-paying job, getting poor grades, or flunking out of school seem to be indications of an inferior product or a failed marketing plan.

In such a social world, when people are disappointed about their life, struggling economically, envious or resentful about what others have accomplished or acquired, and frightened about their future, they become susceptible to a politics of resentment. They are vulnerable to a politics that offers a new identity, a new brand, along with fitting in with and committing to a larger story. The search for meaningful purpose can also lead to the embrace of charismatic leaders peddling mythic themes of collective worth along with supposed threats to such an imagined collectivity.

These are all important elements of religious, psychological, or political cults and are essential to understanding what Trumpist populism and the MAGA movement delivers. They also shed light on why rational arguments and facts do not prompt Trump's followers to reassess their loyalty. Membership is not based on evidence and thoughtful consideration; it is a brand, complete with an implied moral framework. Identity, sense of belonging, and self-worth are based on maintaining the brand and the membership the brand confers. It may feel as though their life depends on it. If they abandon the brand, their confusion, precarious self-worth, and its attendant sense of shame and humiliation will return (Nichols, 2022).

It is important to note that the sense of humiliation I have been describing is not only a product of real events. People clearly interpret those experiences within preexisting frames of self-definition in relation to others in the sociocultural world they inhabit. Humiliation and resentment among Trump's avid supporters are mixed with the racism, antisemitism, xenophobia, misogyny, and homophobia engrained in the American psyche. Enduring strands of White entitlement and resentments at the perceived advances made by Blacks are threaded through the experience of economic precarity. When the White supremist mob that marched in Charlottesville, Virginia in 2017 chanted "Blacks will not replace us" or "Jews will not replace us," they were expressing the fear and rage that are created by an imagined displacement from what American racism taught is their rightful place.

Yet, a closer look at the demographics of Trump's followers complicates interpretation. They are not simply located among the precarious and newly disposed. Recent research indicates that among Trumpist, true believers are independent farmers, White collar workers, owners of businesses, and professionals. For instance, Pape and Ruby (2021) examined 193 of those charged with the January 6 insurrection, and found that 40% of the insurrectionists were professionals, lawyers, physicians, soldiers, accountants, chief executive officers, and at least one state legislator. Only 10% were supporters of "gangs, militias, or militia-like groups." Only 9% were unemployed

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and "most" were not from deep-red states; instead, over 50% came from counties that Biden won (Pape & Ruby, 2021, p. 5). Pape and Ruby found that "a new kind of violent mass movement in which more 'normal' Trump supporters—middle class and, in many cases, middle-aged … joined with extremists in an attempt to overturn a presidential election" (Pape & Ruby, 2021, p. 1). By the early 21st century, a mix of events, narratives, and sociocultural changes had influenced a significant percentage of the voting public to feel an inchoate mix of betrayal and grievance that seems to cut across many demographic levels of Trump's 74 million 2020 voters. Thus, the question remains: What other dimensions of the social terrain engenders such an intense sense of being wronged among so many varied people?

Historical Antecedents of Authoritarianism

The way of being in any historical era can only be understood in terms of intersection of social structures with moral understandings. As many writers (e.g., Gallagher & Lacqueur, 1987; Gergen, 1985; Giddens, 1991; Heller et al., 1986; Taylor, 1989) have pointed out, the contemporary loss of communal meaning and relationships accompanying the economic dislocations of the neoliberal era actually began 400 years ago with the displacements that initiated the early modern era in Europe. Historians and philosophers have studied the intersecting forces propelling disintegration of the social structures that integrated individuals into viable communities, particularly the profound effects of capitalism, urbanization, secularization, and individualism. Over time, the new cultural terrain valorized a self-contained or possessive individualism, technical rationality, and instrumentalism. The moral framework that grew out of these transformations helped create the enchantment with the freedom modern-era mass society offered; but mass society was cold comfort to those in a social world increasingly confusing and alienating.

As the feudal system weakened and enclosures forced peasants into the wage-labor economy located in the growing towns, understandings about belonging, place, work, and responsibility radically changed. Extended families became geographically separated and community ties frayed. Traditional sources of moral authority, such as the church, were weakened. As the demands of the labor market tightened their grip, competitiveness and insecurity joined other dislocations, contributing to ennui and moral confusion (Lockridge, 1970). As industrialization and urbanization continued their unalterable growth and the logic of the market eclipsed former sites of authority, a new conception of the self eventually replaced conceptions that no longer appeared to be viable in the new social order (Baumeister, 1987; Lears, 1981).

de Tocqueville (2000) observed critical aspects of these transformations in *Democracy in America* (first published in 1835). He lamented that individualism as a way of life was both leading to personal isolation and the loss of communal involvement and political engagement upon which democracy depended. Isolation and the pursuit of selfish desires, he believed, could sweep people up in political events they could not control.

Tocqueville's observations are still relevant to the advanced capitalist culture of contemporary America. The loss of community and the traditional meanings that held communities together (as oppressive as they were) stimulates a hunger for belonging but also a confusion about who one is, what one believes in, and with whom one belongs. These absences and confusions leave individuals susceptible to evangelical movements, mass marketed propaganda, and political spectacles, especially when packaged with the skills of a charismatic leader.

Today, large numbers of people live in search of community and belonging, along with a viable moral framework, meaning, and identity. Yet, at the same time, we live in a society driven by a consumerist, mass-market-driven economy controlled by large corporations employing sophisticated techniques in the service of endless consumption. The crass pursuit of what Tocqueville called "selfish desires" undermines the search for meaningful connections grounded in a community of mutual responsibilities. Maintaining a satisfactory "standard of living" supplants more substantial and enduring understandings of the good. Yet, the hunger for what is lost remains. Anxieties of losing one's already tenuous position of security and status combined with the seeming implausibility of regaining viable communities instill a search for substitute forms of belonging along with a vulnerability to charismatic and authoritarian leaders promising to restore what now appears as irretrievably lost. These are the essential

social and experiential elements for the startling rise of populist movements in the contemporary era.

The self I am attempting to elucidate, the way of being in the contemporary social and cultural landscape that has become receptive to Trumpism, requires a grasp of the populist movement associated with Trump. Populism is a kind of authoritarian, secular, religious-like movement in which a charismatic leader seeks to become an autocrat or dictator and usually claims to speak for and in fact "personify" the people (De la Torre, 2010; Finchelstein, 2016, 2017; Griffin, 2017). One reason for the persuasiveness of this claim is that the leader articulates his followers' grievances, concerns, and aspirations in ways few mainstream politicians and public figures are able or willing to do. The connection between populist leaders and their followers can be understood as a kind of mystical, psychological merging (see, e.g., Kohut, 1977). This merging with the leader strengthens authoritarian populism's strategies for stifling dissent, undermining institutional checks and balances, and turning political opponents into an evil other (Finchelstein, 2017; Laclau, 2005; Urbanati, 2014). In fact, populist movements come to be marked by the near deification of the leader. Recall the life-size golden statue of Trump that was displayed at the February 2021 Conservative Political Action Conference at Orlando, Florida.

Post-World War II populism developed into its current manifestations after fascist Germany, Italy, and Japan were defeated in 1945. Although most populist regimes are rightwing, there have been some from the left as well (e.g., Juan Peron in Argentina, Hugo Chavez in Venezuela). Populism can be understood as a strategy some authoritarians use to gain and maintain political power while avoiding identification with the defeated and globally discredited fascists. Although in many ways overlapping, the two movements are nonetheless distinct. Populist movements justify their power through electoral victories, but over time their elections become increasingly corrupt. Unlike a fascist regime, which attacks democracy directly through violence (see, e.g., Paxton, 2004), a populist regime undermines democracy from within. In fascist movements, violence then becomes an end in itself and is thought to be an expression of an authentic self (Finchelstein, 2017, p. 39). Violence is also integral to targeting and excluding a hated other in pursuit of an exclusive national community (Finchelstein, 2016; Griffin, 2017). Populists exercise various degrees of aggression and hatred and can produce violent language and threats, and even sometimes act on those threats; but violence does not stand at the center of populist ideology as it does in fascism. Yet when the leader issues a call to arms in order to protect the movement and thereby save the nation, it is thought to be an absolute necessity to fight and sacrifice for what comes to be experienced as a semireligious, sacred cause. In this way, followers might come to think of themselves as sacred soldiers. The accounts of many who were armed and stormed the capital during the January 6 insurrection and recently have been indicted by the Department of Justice bear this out.

The Development and Psychological Maintenance of a True-Believer, Cult Identity

The ability to ignore, explain away, or just not care about Trump's lies, corruptions, and crass behaviors can be thought of as the result of what Hales (1985) called the self-image management motive. This theory aids in understanding the dynamics that lead to the followers' powerful allegiance to and identification with Trump. Hales found that subjects in laboratory experiments or in everyday life were not best understood as motivated by theoretical concepts such as "cognitive dissonance" or "risky shift"; they acted as they did because they were unconsciously protecting their own self-image. After subjects did something that seemed odd, puzzling, stupid, unethical, or cowardly, Hales came to interpret them as going through a nonconscious process that would allow their self-image and sense of integrity to remain intact while also not denying their actions.

Many years ago, I drew upon Hales' theory to explain the phenomenon of recruitment and indoctrination processes in religious and psychological restrictive groups or cults (Cushman, 1986). I suggested that in order for cult followers to remain in an intensive, abusive, mind control environment, and in fact publicly announce their admiration for the group leader and the group's ideology, they would unconsciously ask themselves something like this: "I thought or did something strange/unusual/unlike me. That must be because either I was greedy, or dishonest, or

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stupid. But I am none of these things, so there must be a good, honest, or intelligent reason for my behavior." Indeed, they did discover a good reason. The group's social control practices would put followers into situations that would force them to dissociate, hallucinate, or have some sort of unusual cognitive, emotional, or kinesthetic experiences. Then, the group's leaders would interpret those experiences as proof that the group's ideology is correct, the follower has become transformed, delivered into a state of enlightenment, and thereby declared one of the saved.

The process works well in part because the emotional gratifications that come with being warmly accepted and praised by the group and being seen and valued by its leaders are huge, especially because of the everyday deprivations described above and the followers' life difficulties previous to contact with the group. This dynamic worked extremely well in late 20th century restrictive religious and psychologically themed groups. It can also be applied to a politically themed movement. All that is needed is (a) a personal, emotional crisis of some sort previous to encounters with the group (a not unusual experience in 21st-century America); (b) a disturbed, manipulative, charismatic individual who seeks to control others; and (c) some sort of colorful stage settings and persuasive techniques that can manipulate followers into doing things they otherwise would not believe in or do.

The kinds of personal and political crises documented in the United States in the early 21st century—including a sense of alienation from and anger at mainstream culture—could well prepare a person to be available for and vulnerable to entrapment into the self-image bind described above. Political groups perform like cults when they employ thought-reform techniques first described by Robert J. Lifton (1961). A few of the characteristics of thought reform Lifton identified are milieu control, mystical manipulation, the demand for purity, the creation of a sacred science, the development of a self-sealing ideology, loading the language, and doctrine over person (see also Cushman, 1986, 1989). Lifton's concepts can be applied to MAGA recruitment–indoctrination processes.

The relief and pride that Trump's followers experience at a Trumpist campaign rally—and especially the exhilaration of being with and accepted by like-minded others espousing elements of traditional American mythology in a mild milieu-controlled environment—could serve as an public initiation enabling identification with Trump and the group. Once identity is locked in through various group processes, it becomes a personal brand, reinforced by outsider disapproval and criticisms of the leader. As followers align with Trump, and especially when that alignment is publicly enacted, they take on the job of managing their self-image by protecting Trump through preinterpreting or explaining away his objectionable acts. The more this is done, the stronger the bond becomes and followers seek out additional shared experiences with other group members, including receiving and disseminating confirming messages from Trump-supportive news feeds and social media. Ironically, the more absurd Trump's claims and ridiculous his behavior, the stronger the followers' loyalty and determination to justify their loyalty and to resist those who doubt or deride him. Lofland (1966) documented this dynamic in a skillful and disturbing article titled "Doomsday Cult." Counterintuitively, Lofland found that the more outlandish and empirically wrong the leader's end-of-the-world predictions were, the more the followers' loyalty and commitment increased.

Manipulative, power-hungry, charismatic leaders employ techniques for turning their followers into selfless soldiers of the cause. Followers of cult-like, restrictive groups labor under difficult, degrading, exploitive, even dangerous conditions, all for the love of the leader and the group's mission, conceived as rescuing and transforming (or restoring) the nation and the world. In this way, a restrictive group such as a religious or psychological cult can mold a sizable contingent into a malleable, tireless, cheap workforce. In Trump's populist movement, followers donate to him and to the cause, buy his accoutrements, attend rallies, write on social media, argue with friends and family, recruit new members, and if necessary act in ways that risk bodily harm—all in the name of "making American great again."

Adherence and commitment to the group carry with it an implicit but powerful sense of sacredness. Achieving political goals becomes a sacred cause and group members become sacred soldiers. Inflicting harm on hated institutions or the movement's enemies and risking death are what soldiers are expected to do. Sacrifice

becomes an essential part of followers' identity; in extreme situations of threat, the ultimate sacrifice may be required (e.g., the mass suicide at Jim Jones' Jonestown or the Branch Davidians' self-destructive refusal to surrender to the Federal Bureau of Investigation in Waco, Texas).

In fascist movements such as Germany's National Socialism, violence was considered an authentic and affirming act, expressive of the sacred community's highest aspirations (Finchelstein, 2017). Harming or killing others became vital to sacred war, an act that recreated the sacred national community. Populist movements have similar but usually somewhat less extreme tendencies to glorify violence and risk death. Trump's ridicule of official policies opposing COVID-19 vaccines and mask mandates on one hand are examples of solidifying the MAGA brand. But, on the other hand, they also could be coded orders to go to war and risk death in order to fight for the sacred cause of "freedom" and defend Trump's honor. Dr. Deborah Birx, Trump's former COVID-19 advisor, estimated that at least 180,000 deaths resulted from Trump's deeply flawed positions on vaccinations and masks; the Lancet Commission reported 40% of U.S. COVID-19 deaths could have been avoided (cited in Blow, 2022). Trump's repeated, explicit and inferred calls for violence, replicated by activists' and followers' amplification of violent rhetoric on social media, are well-known features of MAGA populism. A disturbing number of Trump's followers appear willing to go to war in Trump's name.

The Effects of Online Living

I have previously argued that in the United States, the predominant way of being of the second half of the 20th century developed into what could be called the empty self (Cushman, 1990, 2019). Now well into the 21st century, new social forms and practices are upon us, including our collective immersion in electronic social media and an entire virtual world of interacting, working, and living. These new social practices are shaping a new self for a new historical era, a way of being that Peter Guilford and I suggested could be called the flattened, multiple self (Cushman & Gilford, 1999, 2000). Following the hermeneutic concept that social practices enact moral understandings that then become embodied in individuals, we tried to make sense of what these new practices and understandings were and would become in the near future. As we wrote in 1999:

> This early 21st-century self appears to be marked particularly by a propensity to gather about itself a number of identities that are located around the *outside* of the self, external to but identified with the individual, although this identification takes on a different, less essential or intense or perhaps personalized, valance than identifications within a deep self. We might say, to take a hesitant step toward naming this new way of being, that it is an exterior self with less complex or conflicted identities to draw from—identities that cluster on, not inside, the individual, decorating and standing ready to appear on center stage when the need arises (p. 16).

We came to believe that this way of being is contingent on a defuse kind of dissociative process, milder than the more extreme forms of dissociation discussed in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, fifth edition*. This defuse dissociation, we suggested, has become a common kind of experiential living; it is not an anomalous individual disorder, it is our common way of being. In the words of the *DSM*, depersonalization is characterized by "experiences of unreality or detachment from one's mind, self, or body …" (p. 291). Importantly, the category unspecified dissociative disorder is composed of "chronic recurrent mixed dissociative symptoms that approach but fall short of the diagnostic criteria for dissociative identity disorder, including states secondary to brainwashing or thought reform" (p. 292).

A current form of relational psychoanalysis has developed clinical theory that makes dissociative processes and their attendant therapeutic impasses the fulcrum upon which many successful treatments turn (e.g., Stern, 1997, 2010). The kind of dissociation Cushman and Gilford (1999) described and about which I have since written (Cushman, 2019, 2020) is centered more on the cultural than the individual, but the processes are similar. The point is that the self is now less singular, concrete, and taken-for-granted than in the post-World War II era. We live in a shifting, relativistic, virtual-reality world, and as a result our identity is continually shifting according to the pressures and perceived requirements of the moment.

The main function of external personas produced by the dissociation that both culturally precede and are then employed by the flattened, multiple self is to protect persons from the anxieties generated from contact with those

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thought to be dangerous, unreasoning, and hostile others. This avoidance is usually not a fully conscious choice; it is embodied. Online virtual living appears to affect brains in ways that facilitate dissociative experiences. For instance, television viewing (see, e.g., Kellner, 1990; Postman, 1985) activates a mild hypnotic (i.e., easily persuadable) state, as online experiences (Carr, 2010), which is why, among other things, commercials and television news celebrities pushing wild conspiracy theories are effective.

One aspect of living online—often through avatars interacting with other avatars in an electronic game or online dating site—is that it protects against more direct, interpersonal interaction, against direct relational living and the painful political realities that confront us. But not only is it a product of the cultural clearing; it also reproduces that clearing by delivering the subtle instruction that others are dangerous. Electronic gaming takes place in different virtual worlds peopled by images, not persons. In another venue, clicking on a succession of links in a news article, or following one entertaining gossip item or text or video feed after another, or watching a news program or talk show with a printed news feed running at the bottom of the screen bombard the viewer's senses. These activities leave little time to think deeply, to relax, and to be aware of one's feelings and try to make sense of what has been seen (Hari, 2022). These situations can be interpreted as exercises in avoidance through entertainment, escapes from facing one's thoughts and feelings and the kind of world in which one currently lives. Virtual reality equipment like VR goggles, now being produced and heavily promoted, is an explicit invitation to escape into a different world.

If 21st-century Americans are uncomfortable with a political incident or social situation, one of the things they are implicitly being taught through electronic living is to just "reimagine" it. This is an act increasingly characteristic of late-modern-era virtue. For instance, if someone disagrees with or is made uncomfortable by what someone else is saying, they can just "reimagine" (e.g., demonize) them by denigrating or verbally abusing them in posts or tweets by identifying them, for instance, as pernicious figures in a conspiracy theory. An accompanying effect is achieved by photoshopping online visual images that illustrate the accusation and seem completely real to the untrained eye. Racial and misogynistic stories and various hate-filled conspiracy theories circulated on the internet are reinforced through "reimagined" photoshopped images and repeated or retweeted by right-wing commentators and talk show hosts until they take on a certain taken-for-granted veracity. Thus, the invention of virtual realities is a practice that easily extends to social and political life offline. Vicious online personal attacks have become political weapons (see Edsall, 2022). A new Florida law "reimagines" America's history of slavery and the Jim Crow era by banning accurate history about racism, justified in that it might cause White students to be uncomfortable.

Cognitivism, Sampson (1981) wrote, emphasizes the individualist and subjectivist understandings of human being. When applied to psychotherapy, its characteristic approach is that a psychological issue is thought to occur not solely because of a problem in the interpersonal or social realm but primarily because the patient is thinking about a problem in a flawed way. The solution is to correct the patient's thinking, rather than identify and then work to change the social, material, and political causes of the psychological suffering. In our contemporary electronic world, cognitivism's solution is digitally enacted by modifying a digital image of reality in order for it to conform to what one believes or wishes is true. Understood in this way, photoshopping becomes a kind of cognitivism made electronic. Electronic cognitivism made political becomes Trumpism.

Gilford and I are now 23 years removed from our article and its tentative first steps in developing our interpretations about the multiple self. Participating in an online world has become undeniably more pervasive than most of us could have foreseen. Online communicating through words and pictures is now commonplace and registering "likes" and "dislikes" or clicking on emoticons are taken-for-granted ways of communicating. Writing angry, insulting, and sometimes life-threatening screeds in response to tweets or posts or articles or news stories are simply to be expected. Electronic gaming, which is often pictured in war-torn settings, trains young participants to imagine—in fact electronically practice—war. But more than practice war, these omnipresent electronic games inevitably teach that life *itself* is war. The belief that life is war increasingly is reflective of how Americans treat one another—mean-spiritedness seems to be everywhere. Little wonder then that escape

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strategies, like the flattened, multiple self, have become so pervasive.

In our new virtual world, one's life can be whatever one wishes it to be, fantasizes it to be, and as long as a suitable electronic setting can be located. One of the things we learn from living online is that escape from the dreary, disappointing, or dangerous can be accomplished relatively painlessly by being transported into a different—virtual—world. From there, it is but a small step to believing that all worlds are virtual, simulated, computer-generated—that is, multiple. Because these fictive worlds are all relative, so is truth. In electronic space, there is no one agreed upon truth. Up or down, right or wrong depend on which world you choose to dwell in at the moment. If you do not like the world you are in, you can switch brands to a different, safer, more hospitable, or more exciting world. If you do not like the kind of person you are in your world, you can be transported into a world in which you are a hero or a genius, all powerful, and triumphant—a cyborg or an android, for instance. No need to be self-reflective, to learn and study and train and work at a craft, activities that require time, effort, and the ability to tolerate uncertainty and anxiety. Just imagine a better, different, more certain, more powerful you, find the appropriate virtual setting and mythical story line, and live there for a while.

The movie Avatar (Cameron, 2009) graphically captured the escapist fantasy that comes as a result of shifting into such a new identity. The protagonist Jake Sully had been severely marked, in fact disabled, by his life in the U.S. Marine Corp. It becomes evident that he hates his life, he hates himself. Through a fortunate series of events, he is offered the opportunity to be scientifically transformed into an avatar. Electronic science makes it possible for him to escape from his cynical world of exploitation and hatefulness by transporting him to his avatar's home, a radically different physical and social world; one that is beautiful, spiritual, and proud. Jake himself, in his avatar, is transformed into a new person who is whole, strong, and capable. He comes to embody new values and believes deeply in them; in fact, at one point, he tries to convince those in control of his old world that the path they are on is wrong and in fact disastrous, but to no avail. By the end of the film (no surprise here), he chooses to remain permanently in his avatar and live the rest of his life proudly, gracefully in the new world. His only hope for a better life is to leave his old self, with his old corrupt way of being, and escape into his avatar and the moral world to which his avatar belongs. Escape is the only option. This movie is emblematic of the desperate hope our early 21st-century terrain provides: the hope for escape from an intolerable social world into a transformed identity. Jake shifts from a paralyzed, self-hating, lonely, and defeated person to a strong, athletic, loving, proud, spiritual, and heroic person through the miracle of virtual technology.

A New Healer for a New Era

For every new era, a new self emerges and then a new type of healer appears in the social terrain along with new healing techniques to treat the ills to which the new self is vulnerable (Cushman, 1995; Martin et al., 1988). Our current era is no different in that respect. Today, we seem to be witnessing a type of healer who is a charismatic, populist leader. They heal not by implicitly offering to fill up an empty self (Cushman, 1990, 1995), as cult leaders in the post-World War II era, but by offering an ongoing series of authoritarian spectacles that implicitly offer a new identity and a new national community, complete with an implied moral philosophy. They feature exciting experiences, identification with the aggressor, and the opportunity to join a warmly encouraging community of like-minded, revenge-seeking former victims. These followers unite around a charismatic leader living out a heroic myth whose actions and slogans deliver a powerful moral framework and purpose to those hungry for a new set of beliefs (Rosenberg, 2022). The leader radiates certainty, claims to love them, offers to save the country, and vows to protect and fight for them.

Joining a Trumpist spectacle is a way of escaping a difficult or unsafe life that lacks meaning, offering a moral framework and a personal and communal identity. Members miraculously shift to a new, conflict-free MAGA identity, an identity that vicariously feeds off of the vitality, hypermasculine strength, unshakable certainty, and invincibility that radiate from Trump's Mussolini-like face and posture as a strongman leader. This shift is accomplished by imitating Trump's way of being, which features a belligerent, argumentative, shaming, and self-centered certainty, and thereby

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accepting and protecting a new identity embedded in a different, exciting social world.

This new cultural space, enabling identification with an authoritarian leader, is the moral opposite what occurs of the movie Avatar. Yet, the transformational process is similar. The emotional release of being free to shift to and live out a new, uninhibited, dominant, and triumphant identity within a unified group of enlivened true believers is being provided by the Trumpist populism of our time. Becoming one of his followers appears to be a titillating, even rapturous experience that disinhibits previous societal restraints and releases emotions long hidden or dissociated. In this respect, it might be similar to what Stern (2010) described as the living out of the dissociated "not me" self. Followers are then granted a license (and a blueprint) to enact some of their previously unformulated worst impulses. I am suggesting that we are witnessing a change in the way the role of politics is coming to light: from politics as a collective problem-solving activity to politics as a kind of therapy.

In a dissociative state, we slip away from a social world desperately in need of profound reform. We slip away from confronting our emotional reactions to this harmful world and the parts we play in it. We slip away from honestly and critically engaging with ourselves, our problems, our disappointments and wounds, and our difficulties with friends and family. In a dissociative fog, we slip away even from knowing we have slipped away. Engagement and encounter are frightening for us. We are no longer built for them. Instead, we flee. This escape, when habitual, becomes an ongoing, omnipresent refusal made into a historical way of being and a prominent feature of our 21st-century social terrain.

The four above themes sketch out an intersection of forces that culminate in the transformative mission of the sacred soldier. Those forces create a vulnerability in our personal lives that finds its complement in the weaknesses of the political structures of our society that Trumpist populism has eagerly—and rather easily—breached. We are now witnessing the political results of this vulnerability.

Conclusion

The question of whether U.S. democracy can survive is one that moves many of us to search for immediate solutions such as policy initiatives and political strategies–and we certainly should do so. But the question also leads to a broader, more disturbing question: Given the emergence of a new self that I have described here, layered with the enduring structures of racism and misogyny, is a fully functioning democracy in the United States even possible?

Have the now 400-year modern-era erosion of family and community life and the self-contained individualism of capitalist social relations inextricably weakened a way of being—that is, a self in meaningful relation to others—capable of engaging in social activities and exercising democratic responsibility? Now, along with numerous other forces that undermine democratic engagement, a far-right populist movement strengthened by legions of true believers and conspiratorialists threatens to crush our fragile democratic order. Have we lost the capacity of citizenship, a capacity that relies on relational skills of listening and discussing with others the complex political issues of the day and a devotion to the common good? Can we honestly recognize and admit our nation's history, its ongoing power to shape the present, and the moral limitations of our individual and collective pursuit of self-interest (see Nichols, 2022)? Without these capacities, how can we overcome the forces that fuel the rise of today's populist far right? How can a vital democracy survive?

In the long term, what seems essential is that life must become significantly better for all U.S. residents: not only physically safer, but more just, more equitable, and more meaningful, rooted in viable community. Only then are we likely to develop a new ethic for politicians and news media and a more honest and trustworthy way of communicating among ourselves. This will not take a slight adjustment here or there, and not simply the defeat of Trump or his political allies. It is essential to understand and address the social conditions underlying why so many Americans feel angry, deprived, and betrayed and why they turn to authoritarian populism as an imagined solution. As Hall (1988) once stated in response to the startling success of Margaret Thatcher's rightward turn in the United Kingdom, the task requires no less than a full-fledged re-envisioning of society. If democracy can survive, the United States cannot be based on a mythology centered on guns, hatefulness, and personal license masquerading as freedom. Myths are crucially important for a society; but democracy cannot

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endure by leaving the job of myth making to the brutalities of a populist and authoritarian far right.

Nothing less than a transformation of American society is required, one that supports a more fully humane self along with a philosophical framework through which the self and her just and compassionate relation to others can be realized. It is difficult to know whether or to what degree current democratic forces are capable of developing the cultural movement that could create an effective, ethical framework that could bring forth and sustain such a huge change. If moderates carry on their traditional pattern of timidity and defeat, it will ultimately spell disaster. The Democratic Party's mainstream seems reluctant to undertake such a far-ranging, radical change in political philosophy and public policy. But if it does not, chances are it will be defeated repeatedly by an unscrupulous, duplicitous, far-right populist Republican Party forcibly imposing an authoritarian, misogynist, and xenophobic moral framework on the country, and through that gaining and maintaining permanent political control. The United States will then increasingly resemble other authoritarian regimes.

Can our citizenry and politicians finally fully understand the moment we are in, and act in order to help us all develop a more secure, just, compassionate and cooperative, less dissociated way of life? For the sake of all of us, and for the earth itself, we must.

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