

‘PURE EVIL!’: FRAMING BY DEVIL TERMS AND THE MAGA INSURRECTION

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Abstract: The article concerns the impact framing by devil terms in social media has on democratic deliberation. Daniel Kahneman and Richard Weaver have shown how terms with powerful emotional connections, what Weaver calls god-terms and devil-terms, give the readers/audience cues as to how to react to any given situation. We have applied this theoretical framework to discourses in communities supportive of Donald Trump’s election fraud narrative. Our results show how powerful framing terms were used in order to convince supporters that they faced existential threat from a de-facto coup perpetrated by a powerful and evil elite. We also discuss how such strategies may be countered in order to preserve democracies.

Keywords: rhetorical analysis; election fraud narrative; god-terms; democratic deliberation.

1. Introduction

Our aim in this article is to analyze how framing by devil-terms contributed to the violent insurrection on January 6, 2021, in the United States of America. We will first outline the theory of framing and devil-terms, explain how we adapted Kenneth Burke’s indexing method for this analysis, and present our results. Then we will discuss how framing by devil-terms may impact democratic deliberation and how democracies can defend themselves against this influence. “MAGA” stands for “Make America Great Again” and is a colloquial term used by supporters of former president Donald J. Trump to describe allegiance to his project or vision.

As the ancient rhetoricians knew and as recent research in psychology has confirmed, “different ways of presenting the same information often evoke different emotions” (Kahneman 2011, p. 88). In psychology, these different ways of presenting information are often referred to as “framing,” leading to “framing effects” or “the large changes of preferences that are sometimes caused by [logically] ‘inconsequential’ variations in the wording of a choice problem” (Kahneman 2011, p. 272). Logically inconsequential variations in wording are of course not rhetorically inconsequential; word choice can significantly influence the way we perceive a situation. Moreover, we are often not aware of how the framing of a situation changes our perception of it. Even trained medical professionals were highly susceptible to these effects. Nobel laureate Daniel Kahneman argues that we are not made aware of these effects because our mind has two systems of cognition that operate at different speeds. System 1 is quick and reactive, almost instinctive, and distinguishes “normal from surprising” events in a fraction of a second, engaging the appropriate responses to such things as immediate danger. System 2 is slow and “lazy,” but more rational and reasoned. It is System 2 that

is most able to question and nullify framing. However, System 2 is not engaged unless it becomes clear to us that System 1 is insufficient to solve the problem that stands before us. To paraphrase Kahneman, “Unless there is an obvious reason to do otherwise, most of us passively accept [descriptions of situations] as they are framed and therefore rarely have an opportunity to discover the extent to which our [perceptions of them] are frame-bound rather than reality-bound” (2011, p. 367). In order to engage System 2, people need a kind of shock that makes them aware that the perception of reality delivered to them by System 1 is not reliable or sufficient.

Of course, what psychologists call “framing effects” have long been acknowledged and analyzed in the field of rhetoric. As Gary Layne Hatch writes, “Some words carry more emotional weight than others” (2011, p. 67), and some carry “such powerful emotional overtones that they color other terms that are associated with them” (2011, p. 68). Borrowing from Kenneth Burke’s *A Rhetoric of Motives*, Richard Weaver refers to these as “ultimate terms,” calling words with a strong positive color “god-terms” and words with a strong negative color “devil-terms.” The strongest god- and devil-terms in a community will be those that carry “the greatest blessing” or “the greatest rebuke” (1953, p. 89), indicative of their central placement in the hierarchy of values that community has adopted. As Weaver notes, “it is the nature of the conscious life of man to revolve around some concept of value” and they have to know where they are “in the ideological cosmos” in order to coordinate their activities (1953:89). For most people, the coordinating concept is some idea “abstracted from religion or historical speculation” (1953, p. 90).

However, in many groups some terms take on new meanings or importance where “their meaning seems inexplicable unless we accept the hypothesis that their content proceeds out of a popular will that they shall mean something” (1953, p. 106). Such a charismatic term “is given its impulsion without reference, and it functions by convention” (1953, p. 106). Any stated metaphysics will have a hierarchy of ultimate terms at the apex of its hierarchy, but “When the ultimate terms become a series of bare abstractions, the understanding of power is supplanted by a worship of power” (1953, p. 109). Charismatic terms do not necessarily have any great importance in normal life, but take on an almost symbolic meaning in these special circumstances. As Weaver writes, “under the stress of feeling or preoccupation, quite secondary terms can be moved up to the position of ultimate terms, where they will remain until reflection is allowed to resume sway” (1953, p. 110). Just as Kahneman, Weaver emphasizes the importance of reflection and thinking critically about the descriptions of reality we take in and their implicit hierarchy of values.

Burke developed indexing: a method to analyze the hierarchies of values implicit in descriptions of reality. We will not give a complete description of the method, since that has been done elsewhere (Isaksen 2012, 2017, 2020). Rather, we will give a brief description of the parts of the method we have used in our analysis. Burke writes,

We proceed on the assumption that the “perfect case” for analytic purposes is a definitive literary text . . . In this case, the “signs” manifested by a human personality or by a social incident (or social order, or social movement, or cultural trend in general) would be treated as relatively obscure aspects of motivational structures that are least obscure in literary texts.

There would thus be no difference “in principle” between textual analysis and social analysis. (1955, p. 270)

So a “definitive literary text” would be the ideal starting point, but it is naturally difficult to find such a text in a loosely organized and somewhat secretive insurrectionist movement. However, Burke says that the same method can be applied the other way around (1955, p. 275). So critics can choose whether to start with a definitive text and then move from there to individual conversations, letters, etc., or go the other way. Critics could index conversations, letters, Facebook comments, etc. just as well, though the motivational structures in these texts may initially be more obscure. We chose this second approach, since we were unable to find a single definitive text that was able to sum up the MAGA movement after the election defeat in November 2020.

The basics of Burke’s indexing method can be summed up as follows: (1) Find key terms in a text that operate as summarizing terms for many other terms around them, (2) find the words that appear together with the key terms and form “equations” or clusters, (3) see how the terms in the clusters relate to each other in a hierarchical sense, especially in terms of abstract/concrete or means/ends, (4) try to find the god-term or devil-term that summarizes or works as the basic motivation for all the key terms and equations.

As mentioned, we lack a definitive literary text and therefore decided to work from the smaller scattered texts available. When working bottom up like this, it is important to find some selection criteria for the key terms to look for. We chose to look for terms that (1) occurred with great frequency in the MAGA-sphere, (2) clearly contributed to framing a situation very negatively, and (3) sometimes had no clear referent in more general vocabularies. Burke claims that when “an apparently arbitrary or illogical association of ideas can be shown to possess an ‘emotional’ connective” the ‘underlying pattern of experience’ or hierarchy of values become more easily observable. This is particularly the case when “words refer to no specific thing—as ‘liberty, equality, fraternity’— ‘my country’—‘the good of society.’ In such cases, the contexts in which the words appear will generally be constants” (1968, p. 159).

We then chose to look at how these key terms related to each other hierarchically and find whether one term seemed capable of being a summarizing term for all the others. These results are not a comprehensive survey of the MAGA-sphere, but rather hopefully constitute what Burke would call “a representative anecdote” to summarize the motivational universe in this movement. The list of key terms we found are not exhaustive.

In the MAGA world, after Trump’s election defeat in November 2020, we observed how a hierarchy of ultimate terms developed from a mixture of Christianity and war-rhetoric to encourage the violent insurrection on January 6. Although much of this motivational structure was already in place before November 4, significant changes occurred afterwards in the structure that heightened the threat perception and further legitimized violence. Trump-friendly social media accounts propagated messages using an internal speech code where new words formed and common words took on a new

meaning, constructing a conspiratorial view of reality where white Trump voters were on the brink of mass extermination.

2. Analysis

In order to highlight the impact of the terms in this messaging, we sampled written messages in news media and social media that were most influential for Trump supporters during this period, with a focus on Twitter and the speeches made at the Jericho March on December 12, 2020. We analyzed the messages taken from the above-mentioned sources for god-terms and devil-terms, and we found a network primarily of devil-terms that heightened threat perception and encouraged violence.

The trigger for what would become the January 6 insurrection was the election defeat of then President Donald J. Trump and his refusal to concede, calling his defeat “a major fraud on our nation” (Trump 2020). The term “fraud” is echoed throughout the MAGA online community after this and is the entry point to the conspiratorial worldview promoted by the likes of Alex Jones and Sidney Powell. One Trump supporter wrote, “Biden is the criminal, and American’s will NOT accept him as president. Democrats cheated and used phony ballots to count for Biden right before our eyes, and then declared him the winner. American’s have been DUPED by the LYING DEMOCRATS They must pay for their ELECTION FRAUD” (Lu Our Morgan 2021). Trump supporters believed they deserved to retain the White House (presidency) and were convinced they would retain it in the election. Trump and his surrogates echoed this sentiment consistently. There was no way this was not true in their minds, and that message kept being reinforced on all the channels they listened to, so fraud became the only acceptable explanation for what was in reality an election defeat.¹ Trump supporters also self-selected information channels that would reinforce this bias. The artist Lisa Matassa writes, “Do yourself a favor, if you want the truth about this sham of an election, watch/listen to @newsmax or @OANN. Everything else is just democratic static. #ElectionFraud #BidenIsCorrupt #MSMSucksAss” (2020). As conservative author Rod Dreher writes, Trump “didn’t lose the election, according to them. It was taken from him. This is an article of faith, not to be doubted. If you doubt, you are a traitor, a coward, in league with the Devil” (2020).

But who would do such a thing? Who would have the motive and power required to prevent the president of the United States of America from winning re-election? The answer in the MAGA-sphere is a sprawling conspiracy of groups that are blamed for everything that is wrong with America. When the Conservative majority Supreme Court did not even want to take a look at the election fraud case brought up by the state of Texas, General Michael Flynn (a Trump surrogate) stated, “Supreme Court has been fully compromised by the swamp via death threats and blackmail” († KING BENEDICT OBI 2021). The “swamp” is a symbolic constellation of everyone the Trump supporters hate. One Trump supporter refers to Biden as “a corrupt criminal dragged out of the swamp who supports ANTIFA and BLM” (William Adams 2020). Initially used to refer to corrupt politicians and lobbyists, “the swamp” now refers to anyone who opposes Trump. Another Parler user wrote “Biden is the illegitimate gay and criminal,” and that “crazed Democrats” were behind the “globalist election fraud” (PatriotTakes 2021) Globalist is another new term that has come to mean essentially anything that is not a nationalist.

Ryan Frazier writes, "Trump used this election to expose everyone on the globalist payroll. Genius" (2020). So, we have the election fraud and theft perpetrated by the crazed Democrats, globalists, gay, criminal, Big Tech swamp.

When critics study motivational structures, Burke suggests they should keep an eye out for the hierarchical relationships between key terms, often found by asking how the words relate to each other in terms of abstract/concrete or cause/effect. These alleged masterminds behind the "election fraud" function as the cause to the "election fraud" effect and are therefore above "election fraud" in the hierarchy. The next level up would be the motivation for the swamp.

Most of the time, this next step is only vaguely hinted at, but at its heart are the "White Replacement Myth" and the New World Order conspiracy theories. The main gist is that elites or Jews are using mass immigration, cultural degradation, and feminism to mastermind a slow genocide against the so-called "white race" until they can gain control over the whole world through a gigantic mass murder of the majority of the world population. This conspiracy is alluded to in statements like "We're quickly approaching a day when it will be nearly impossible to get a job as a White Man" (The Christian Crusader 2021) and ZTexanz "WILL JOE BIDEN USE NUKES AGAINST AMERICANS?" (ZTexanz 2021). The higher up you go, the more the inherent racism and paranoia become evident. After George W. Bush congratulated Biden on his election victory, Rockets Redglair writes that the Bush family "smell of the liberal New World order satanic global elite ... Unleash hell! This is our last chance to destroy those who would destroy America and her values!" (2020). Another writes, "'Diversity' is a code word for White Genocide" (The Tax Code 2020). Alex Jones and the QAnon movement had long been spreading these theories before the election defeat, and gained new prominence and followers afterwards. Jones was one of the featured speakers at the December 12, 2020 "Jericho March" where he said, among other things, "world government is here" and "we will never bow down to the Satanic Pedophile New World Order!" (Dreher 2020). According to this motivational structure, the election fraud was perpetrated by a "swamp" motivated by a desire to control the world, wipe out the white race, and commit mass murder on a global scale. Often, the call to violence is explicit: "Patriotic brothers, the Reelected President of the USA DONALD TRUMP is waging an epic battle against the deep state, which are national and international mafias that belong to the new world order This is a war . . . NO COWARD IS ALLOWED!" (Republico Francisco de Miranda 2020).

At the apex of this hierarchy of devil-terms is the term that gathers the meaning and tendency of all the lower terms: Evil. This term from Christianity is constantly applied to Democrats and the opponents of Trump and "Evil" or "PURE EVIL" is repeated constantly, such as "PURE EVIL: Democrat Operatives in Michigan and Georgia Tampered with Military Ballots — Filled Out New Ones 100% MARKED FOR JOE BIDEN" (PatriotGazette 2020) or "Stand strong Patriots. Trump won this election. We are fighting PURE EVIL" (Conservative Republican Alliance of NY 2020). In the speech referenced earlier, Jones claims that Mark Zuckerberg and other "elites" and members of the "swamp" are "miserable slaves of Satan," and another speaker claims that "just as Trump won a landslide election victory, we will have a landslide against evil" (Dreher 2020). Thus, the election defeat of President Trump, in this world, becomes effectively the victory of PURE EVIL or Satan. Any person that thinks of themselves as "good" would

therefore have a duty to fight this with violence. As one supporter writes, "Joey 'Lyn' Biden Is NOT your president! Donald Trump won in a LANDSLIDE! We are living in the Time of God's REVELATIONS. This is ALL designed to maximize the unveiling of pure evil & Corruption" (CensorshipWorld 2020).

This legitimizing of violence becomes more explicit in late December as the Trump campaign lawsuits fail and as the electors are certified for Biden. Conservative radio host Eric Metaxas says "patriots" have to fight "to the last drop of blood" to preserve Trump's presidency and that he is "willing to die in this fight" (Dreher 2020). Michael Flynn "endorsed a call for Donald Trump to declare martial law and arrest his political enemies," and another speaker at the rally called for Christians to organize "militias" to support Trump by violent means (Dreher 2020).



Figure 1. Hierarchy of terms

These pyramid connections starting from the bottom upwards show how 'devil-terms' were used to frame the election defeat as the victory of evil, leading logically to the violent MAGA insurrection as a "fight back" against evil. This framing was echoed consistently and effectively in order to induce the primarily Christian and conservative audience to accept the perception of reality these influencers wanted them to see.

3. Discussion

Our results show how powerful framing terms were used in order to convince Trump supporters that they faced existential threat from a de-facto coup perpetrated by a powerful and evil elite. The effectiveness of this strategy can be shown partly by the number of adherents this framing of the issue still retains among a significant portion of the American electorate.

It also seems clear to us that the violence on January 6 was not incidental but rather a logical consequence of the demagogic framing used by Donald Trump and his surrogates. How can you peacefully disagree with a "swamp" that uses "blackmail and death threats"? How can you find compromise with "PURE EVIL"? How can white Trump

voters be expected to not act violently when they are faced with the threat of extermination? As Patricia Roberts-Miller writes in *Demagoguery and Democracy*,

Once [demagogues] have convinced their followers that it's kill or be killed, any policy short of purification makes no sense . . . [Political opponents] are no longer simply irritating, but incessantly and inevitably plotting the extermination of us. Therefore, we are justified in attacking, expelling, and even exterminating them—it's necessary self-defense. In such a situation, extraordinary action is called for—you can't compromise about your own extermination (2017, p. 88).

The insurrection on January 6 and the following violence was almost a rhetorical necessity as soon as Trump refused to concede and declared that an illegitimate coup had succeeded in defrauding millions of Americans. Burke describes how a speaker can set up a motivational structure and make a member of the audience driven to fulfill the implications of that structure: “the ‘principle of consummatory self-consistency’ would provide an incentive, or almost a compulsion, to continue in this same direction, quite as an author who had carried a novel to near completion might not be able to rest until he had finished it” (2001, p. 49). Trump carefully constructed a narrative where those who opposed him were a part of an evil elite and those who supported him were “the people.” His election defeat would be inconsistent with that narrative, and therefore he pretended that he won but was foiled by election fraud. That signaled to Trump’s supporters that their opponents had broken the rule of law, and that retribution of the same kind would be just fighting back. As Paul Woodruff writes, people “conclude that they must achieve their goals outside of democratic politics altogether, using money, or violence, or even the threat of terror” (2005, p. 81).

This was an insurrection that was fomented and planned on social media. Kahneman writes that “Broader frames and inclusive accounts generally lead to more rational decisions” (2011, p. 372), but social media platforms such as Twitter or Parler by design limit the framing and inclusivity a participant can provide for accounts of reality. So, it stands to reason that more interaction on these platforms will lead to more irrational decisions. In addition, social media tends to build information bubbles where the information you receive is more likely to be framed in a narrow way that confirms your biases and preferences.

Of course, there have always been information bubbles and ideological enclaves, but the current form of social media discourse makes the overlap of information and framing between ideological factions increasingly smaller. In the end, this can fatally damage what Woodruff refers to as the democratic virtue of harmony. By having less common experiences, common interpretations of shared experiences, quite simply “less in common,” there is a danger that democratic elections and choices become zero-sum partisan battles, where one’s victory always comes at the expense of the other. What commonwealth can one have if one has nothing in common? As Woodruff writes, “Without harmony there cannot be a *demos*—a people—who can hold the reins of power. Only factions. And rule by a faction is not democracy” (2005, p. 93). Indeed, “What could ‘government FOR the people mean, if the people are so badly divided that there is nothing that they want, together?’” (Woodruff 2005, p. 81).

Just as democracies in the 1930s and 1940s struggled to come to grips with the implications of the radio, democratic societies today have to learn to answer and counter the questions and challenges posed by social media. System 1 framing and charismatic

ultimate terms are powerful tools that lend themselves well to, and can be easily weaponized through, social media platforms. There may be some regulatory responses that can help, but in the end, it is the audience that needs to learn to question and reject these. As Kahneman points out, System 2 is not as easily tricked and can help us make more rational decision. What is needed is that “shock” to help us realize that System 1 is not adequate for this situation, the realization that we may be tricked by how a situation or problem has been framed for us. This reflection should include an analysis of the ultimate terms by which we orient ourselves. Weaver writes that, “An ethics of rhetoric requires that ultimate terms be ultimate in some rational sense. The only way to achieve that objective is through an ordering of our own minds and our own passions” (1953, p. 111). He suggests a dialectic or discussion with ourselves to see “what the wider circumferences of [our] terms of persuasion are” (1953, p. 112). What do we see as the ultimate good and ultimate evil, and why? Weaver writes that “this process will not only improve the consistency of [our] thinking but it will also prevent [us] becoming a creature of evil public forces and a victim of [our] own thoughtless rhetoric” (1953, p. 112).

For us, it seems clear that this can only happen by reintegrating rhetoric in the core curriculum of public education in democratic societies. As Aristotle knew, giving power to the people also means giving power to those who can persuade the people, and therefore the people need to be trained to defend themselves against nefarious persuasive actors. Nathan Crick writes, “By making the individual both the means and the end of democracy, [society] committed itself to investing its energies into creating individuals capable of possessing a moral will that achieves enough autonomy from dominant social forces that it is capable of reacting back on those forces with intelligence and power” (2010, p. 18). Partisan social media is one of these emergent social forces that democratic individuals need to be able to react back against.

Rhetorical education, as Burke envisioned it in “A Linguistic Approach to Problems of Education,” would enable this by subjecting students to repeated cognitive “shocks” that make it clear to them that System 1 is not giving them an adequate account of reality, engaging and training System 2 until this becomes a mental reflex. Education as such would be “the institutionalization of an attitude that one should be able to *recover at critical moments*” (1955, p. 273). To rephrase his warning from 1955, “we see democracy being threatened by the rise of enormous ‘policy-making’ [social] media that exert great rhetorical pressure upon their readers without at the same time teaching how to discount such devices; and nothing less than very thorough training in the discounting of rhetorical persuasiveness can make a citizenry truly free” (1955, p. 285).

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ⁱ The terms «fraud» and «election fraud» receive their highest ever search term count on Google in the two first weeks of November 2020, with a second highest search count the week when electors were certified and a third peak from January 3-9.