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Chapter 5

Folie à Deux in the 21st Century: QAnon and the American Dream Delusion

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this chapter is to use the concept of folie à deux (or shared delusion disorder) to examine the phenomena of “Q” and the “QAnon” movement in the 21st century. The insurrection which occurred on January 6, 2021 during the attack on the United States’ capitol, drew the authors’ attention to try to understand the reason for this mass violence and to determine what individuals, motivations, and beliefs brought this violence to life. The allegory of Plato’s Cave is used by the authors to offer the reader a context to place the current increasingly bizarre claims and conspiracies that those following the QAnon espouse. Moreover, a discussion is presented of why these beliefs are so attractive to some and how difficult it is to get one to leave the movement.

INTRODUCTION: THE AMERICAN DREAM DELUSION

If you tell a lie big enough and keep repeating it, people will eventually come to believe it. The lie can be maintained only for such time as the State can shield the people from the political, economic and/or military consequences of the lie. It thus becomes vitally important for the State to use all of its powers to repress dissent, for the truth is the mortal enemy of the lie, and thus by extension, the truth is the greatest enemy of the State.

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-Unknown, attributed to Joseph Goebbels

The purpose of this chapter is to use the concept of folie à deux (or Shared Delusion Disorder) to examine the phenomena of “Q” and the “QAnon” movement during and after the Trump presidency. The insurrection which occurred on January 6, 2021 during the attack on the United States’ capitol drew the authors’ attention to trying to understand the reason for this mass violence and to determine what individuals, motivations, and beliefs brought this violence to life. The *Allegory of Plato’s Cave* is used by the authors to offer the reader a possible context to place the current increasingly bizarre claims and conspiracies that those following the QAnon espouse. Moreover, a discussion is presented of why these beliefs are so attractive to some and how difficult it is to get one to leave the movement.

WHAT IS THE AMERICAN DELUSION OF QANON?

In October of 2017 (Garry, Walther, Rukaya, & Mohammed, 2021), a post appeared on 4chan, a historically very controversial message board, from an anonymous account calling itself “Q Clearance Patriot.” This poster, who became known simply as “Q,” claimed to be a high-ranking government insider with access to classified information about then President Donald Trump’s “war against the global cabal.” Q predicted that a “war” would soon culminate in “The Storm”. This was to be an appointed time when President Donald Trump would finally unmask the *cabal*, punish its members for their crimes, and restore America to “greatness.”

QAnon, ultimately, became the umbrella term for a set of internet conspiracy theories that allege, falsely, that the world is run by a “cabal of Satan-worshipping pedophiles” (Amarasingam & Argentino, 2020). The followers of QAnon believe that this *cabal* includes top United States Democrats such as current President Joseph R. Biden Jr., Hillary Clinton, and former President Barack Obama. They have also included several public entertainers and celebrities like Oprah Winfrey, Tom Hanks, and Ellen DeGeneres and even religious figures including Pope Francis and the Dalai Lama. Many of them also believe that, in addition to molesting children, members of this group kill their victims to extract and consume a life-extending chemical called *Adrenochrome*.

Regarding former President Donald J. Trump, they believed that he was recruited by top United States military generals to run for president in 2016 to break up this hidden criminal conspiracy and bring its members to “justice” (Amarasingam & Argentino, 2020). Many of these “cabal members” would then soon be arrested and some imprisoned at Guantánamo Bay, while others would face military tribunals and be executed. Since it began, QAnon has incorporated elements of many other conspiracy theory communities, including claims about the assassination of John F. Kennedy, the existence of UFOs, and the 9/11 “truther” movement.

The ultimate conclusion to all this is a predicted event called “The Storm” (Garry, Walther, Rukaya, & Mohammed, 2021). President Trump made a cryptic remark in front of a group of senior military leaders during an October 2017 photo opportunity that QAnon believers have pointed to as proof of his plan to break up the “cabal.” Posing alongside military generals, Mr. Trump said, “You guys know what this represents? Maybe it’s the calm before the storm.”

QANON AND FOLIE À DEUX: THE NEW AMERICAN WAY?

Folie à deux (Arnone, Patel, Tan, 2006), translated as “madness for two” and also known as shared psychosis or Shared Delusional Disorder (SDD), is a psychiatric syndrome in which symptoms of a delusional belief, and sometimes hallucinations, are transmitted from one individual to another. The disorder was first conceptualized in 19th-century French psychiatry by Charles Lasègue and Jean-Pierre Falret.

While its application is debatable, the authors thought it would be interesting to apply this concept to QAnon and its followers. The authors also thought it would be informative to use a well-known allegory to attempt to put the current experiences into perspective.

QANON AND “PLATO’S ALLEGORY OF THE CAVE”

As the authors examined “Q” and the phenomena of “QAnon” (Aliapoulios, Papisavva, Ballard, De Cristofaro, Stringhini, Zannettou, & Blackburn, 2021) in much more detail after the insurrection by President Trump supporters against the United States Capitol on January 6, 2021, a very old “tale” came to mind. If one is unfamiliar with *Plato’s Allegory of the Cave*, it is a thought experiment referring to multiple philosophical concepts. The authors’ application of this analogy to QAnon will look at denial and delusion as barriers to the reality testing needed to “leave the cave.”

To sum up the story, “reality is at times invented to explain one’s situation.” In Plato’s allegory (Hall, 1980), a group of individuals are chained in a cave at an early age, then observe what they believe to be objects on a wall, which are in fact the shadows of objects behind them. When a prisoner escapes the cave, he returns to explain to prisoners still residing in the cave that a very different reality exists and that the shadows are only incomplete projections of reality. There is an entire big world outside of the cave and they are witnessing only these shadows.

Many of the prisoners (Heidegger, 2013) then take on the belief that if they are to leave the cave, they will become “crazy” like their friend and lose all sense of what they still believe is reality. Therefore, they dig deeper into their delusion to protect their reality. Plato discusses several traits that are needed for prisoners to leave the cave and abandon this false reality.

Plato’s philosophical framework (Hall, 1980) on what is required to “leave the cave” serves in part as a warning that without deductive reasoning and trust in the sciences all can be subject to living a “false reality.” Only those capable of the reasoning required to accurately gauge reality can leave the cave. Others may be dragged from the cave against their will and only after some time do their eyes adjust to the true light of day. But there will be those that reject facts and science to further solidify their delusion. It is unfortunate how common this has been; history is littered with examples of scientists persecuted for no other reason than presenting evidence that runs contrary to popular belief. Refusal to observe the deductive process and logical reasoning is well documented, making Plato’s allegory a useful thought experiment to examine the problems of denial as it pertains to belief systems. Those that live outside the cave are not subject to “reality testing” as those who have been raised within false narratives. The variables of reality testing are also different person to person. -?

When examining QAnon (Aliapoulios, Papisavva, Ballard, De Cristofaro, Stringhini, Zannettou, & Blackburn, 2021) one must realize that there will be people of different backgrounds with different deductive reasoning aptitudes. The variables of duration, intensity, and cohesion also that may need to be addressed. Essentially, one must determine, “how deep are they in the QAnon cave?” All variables

are important, but each person will respond differently when presented truth based on their aptitude for reasoning in combination with the significance of that held belief. For many, QAnon has apparently become their blueprint for how to understand their unanswered questions and how to proceed in a seemingly chaotic world.

QANON, DISINFORMATION AND PLATO'S CAVE

When looking at mitigating any act of mass violence, one must understand that a great number of vulnerabilities exist (Pace, 2017). In the case of QAnon and other similar groups, growing mass delusion is the risk, and its disarmament ultimately may become everyone's responsibility.

Plato's *Allegory of the Cave* serves to, in part, offer that the reality of one's existence is at times created by *them* to explain to *themselves* their place in the world. Thus, regarding QAnon, has a new "cave" developed in which so many are "imprisoned" or has the existing "cave" simply been discovered?

BRINGING QANON OUT OF THE CAVE: WHY IS CHANGING A BELIEF SO DIFFICULT?

A renewed crisis of 1st Amendment rights (Aliapoulios, Papasavva, Ballard, De Cristofaro, Stringhini, Zannettou, & Blackburn, 2021). ensued in the following days of the "storming" of the U. S. Capital. Former President Trump, his personal lawyer Rudy Giuliani, and others have come to be viewed as having incited a "riot," eventually leading to the ban of their social media accounts. Various social media platforms quickly removed users who might be "inciting imminent lawless action" as described in U.S. Supreme Court case *Brandenburg v. Ohio* (*Brandenburg v. Ohio*, 395 U.S. 444, 1969). While the *Brandenburg* ruling is considered more lenient than previous Supreme Court cases which cite the common law language of "not shouting fire in a crowded theater" or the "clear-and-present danger" limitations on freedom of speech, its conclusion still led to the ban of thousands of social media accounts prior. One might argue that after the events on January 6, 2021 Plato's Cave began to be closed off to many, from fear of what more mass violence might emerge. Of course, liability concerns that large social media platforms might be held responsible was a major impetus to act, and to act quickly.

How and why social media platforms adjust new policy to the backlash of shutting down entire platforms to individuals or groups continues to be questioned and debated. While Facebook began making such inhouse changes even before the insurrection, *Parler* (*i.e.*, a social media service popular with American right-wing users) and other social media outlets shut down their platforms completely to individuals and groups who were sharing false information to potentially encourage more violence. What is clear is that an unprecedented crisis was felt in those efforts to protect the public by limiting freedom of speech.

QANON AND GROUP THINK: FOLIE À DEUX AS A VARIABLE

Folie à deux or Shared Delusion Disorder (Sacks, 1988) involves people having shared delusions. The strength of the delusion is validated by others who are developing deeper roots into the delusion itself. Going back to Plato's cave, as the prisoner who has discovered the "shadow figures" as the true reality

returns to the cave they find they are immediately invalidated by the larger group. A delusional group who affirms their delusion through the shared experience reaffirms that delusion by attacking the one that returns. Ultimately, the ultimatum is if one dissents then they will be disbarred or punished in some way. While those who share dissenting opinions may pose cognitive dissonance or a desire to speak up, they will many times go along with the group from fear of isolation, or punishment. Such pressure from group think therefore is more dangerous as it prohibits any kind of critical thinking or outside evaluation. Group think is harder to breach as there is a punitive measure to its membership. This often results in black and white thinking, where one is in or one is out.

Individuals obviously calibrate their belief systems differently (Hart, 1991). Some people can evaluate and consider any event on faith alone rejecting any information which conflicts with their belief system. Others may be able to have faith where facts are couched or supported with additional circumstantial evidence. QAnon provides some supposed evidence, then couches these claims alongside other founded and reliable claims. This couching then becomes a sandwich of delivery so to speak, layering a delusional claim in between real evidence or events. This allows for an individual to consume false realities more easily, as outrageous as they may seem. When surrounded by what appears truthful people will consume the “sandwich” without picking apart the facts.

QAnon, while homegrown in the United States, has been fertilized by foreign disinformation campaigns (Amarasingam & Argentino, 2020). Adversaries sowing dissent is not new, but more modern campaigns have been noted in their increased intensity due to the ease of access inherent in the internet. In 2016, evidence of foreign IP addresses, political memes created by foreign actors, and even protests staged from outside our country began to show a new alarming prevalence. This is the equivalent of a Russian or Iranian actor walking into Plato’s cave to confirm the delusions of the prisoners and provide evidence against the deductive reasoning required for these prisoners to leave.

The phenomenon of cohesion of strangers through the Internet (Jackson, Jong, & Bilkey, 2018). has been greatly accelerated. There is more accessibility to easily find those with similar beliefs, where cohesion is sought out with purpose by the user. These groups may be small, but can feel profound to the user, promulgating their belief that otherwise might be. Algorithms are also providing a user experience that directs the user more narrowly to their cohesive group. Using Plato’s analogy, there is less and less interaction between the cave and the outside world, as users are never brought new information, and if they are, it is only portrayed as madness.

QANON AND FOLIE À DEUX/SHARED DELUSIONAL DISORDER: TYPES OF DELUSIONS

Most define “delusions” as “fixed beliefs that do not change, even when a person is presented with conflicting evidence” (Reddy & Pynchon, 1999). Types of delusion include:

- *Bizarre delusions* that are clearly implausible and not understood by peers within the same culture, even those with psychological disorders. When one examines the beliefs of QAnon, their ideas on “Pizzagate” and “Satanic cannibal pedophile cabal” come to mind.
- *Non-bizarre delusions* are common among those with personality disorders and are understood by people within the same culture. When one thinks of QAnon, their beliefs in some national conspiracy to “fix” the presidential election in 2020 comes to mind.

- *Mood-congruent delusions* correspond to a person's emotions within a given timeframe, especially during an episode of mania or depression. When examining QAnon, the actions of the mob that attacked the U.S. Capitol after watching former President Trump and others encouraging them to "take action or lose their county" come to mind.
- *Mood-neutral delusions* are not affected by mood and can be bizarre or non-bizarre. When examining QAnon, the daily newscasts from Fox News and others continuing the "big lie" or false news comes to mind.

QANON AND FOLIE À DEUX/SHARED DELUSIONAL DISORDER: BIOPSYCHOSOCIAL EFFECTS?

As with many psychiatric disorders, Shared Delusional Disorder (Trabert, 1999) can negatively impact the psychological and social aspects of a person's wellbeing. Unresolved stress resulting from a delusional disorder can eventually contribute to or increase the risk of other negative health outcomes such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes, obesity, immunological problems, and others. These health risks increase with the severity of the disease, especially if an affected person does not receive or comply with adequate treatment. Persons with a delusional disorder have a significantly high risk of developing psychiatric comorbidities such as depression and anxiety.

Shared Delusional Disorder (Shimizu, Kubota, & Toichi, 2007) can have a profoundly negative impact on a person's quality of life. Persons diagnosed with a mental health disorder commonly experience social isolation, which is detrimental to psychological health. This is especially problematic with Shared Delusional Disorder because social isolation contributes to the onset of the disorder; in particular, relapse is likely if returning to an isolated living situation in which shared delusions can be reinforced.

Regarding QAnon, the question becomes: What is going to happen as their "predictions" continue to be unfulfilled? While they do have a way of kicking the can down the road and making excuses as to why a predicted event did not occur, this may run out soon. The United States needs to continue its concern over what actions these followers take in response to their increasing stress and disillusionment. It is hoped that they will simply realize the false narrative they have been following and return to common sense, but others may continue or move to acts of mass violence.

QANON AND FOLIE À DEUX/SHARED DELUSIONAL DISORDER: CAUSES?

While the exact causes of folie à deux or Shared Delusional Disorder are unknown (Wegerif, Fujita, Dony, Perez, Richards, & van Rhyn, 2016), the main two contributors appear to be stress and social isolation. People who are socially and financially isolated together tend to become dependent on those they are with, leading to an inducer influence on those around them. Additionally, people developing shared delusional disorder do not have others reminding them that their delusions are either impossible or unlikely. Because of this, treatment for shared delusional disorder includes removing those affected from the inducer.

If one applies this to QAnon followers it could explain why so many of them are lower class, uneducated, and under extreme financial strain.

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Stress (Trabert, 1999) is also a factor because it is a primary trigger of mental illness. Most people that develop shared delusional disorder are genetically predispose to mental illness, but this predisposition is not enough to develop a mental disorder. However, stress can increase the risk of this disorder. When stressed, an individual's adrenal gland releases the stress hormone cortisol into the body, increasing the brain's level of dopamine; this change can be linked to the development of a mental illness, such as a shared delusional disorder.

Regarding QAnon, their own personal stressors in life that they must deal with daily are then compounded by others telling them their country is being taken away from them.

QANON AND FOLIE À DEUX/SHARED DELUSIONAL DISORDER: TREATMENT?

After a person has been diagnosed with any *sickness*, the next step is to determine the proper course of *treatment* (Aliapoulios, Papasavva, Ballard, De Cristofaro, Stringhini, Zannettou, & Blackburn, 2021). The first step is to separate the formerly healthy person from the inducer and see if the delusion goes away or lessens over time. If this is not enough to stop the delusions, there are two possible courses of action: medication or therapy which is then broken down into personal therapy and/or family therapy.

Regarding QAnon, Americans must determine if simply giving those infected shots of reality is enough to change their illness.

With treatment, the delusions and therefore the disease are supposed to eventually lessen so much so that it will practically disappear in most cases. However, left untreated it can become chronic and lead to anxiety, depression, aggressive behavior, and further social isolation. Unfortunately, there are not many statistics about the prognosis of shared delusional disorder as it is a rare disease and it is expected that most cases go unreported; however, with treatment, the prognosis is very good.

Regarding QAnon, there is a real threat from the future actions of those who do not receive treatment or benefit from it. There are currently fences and barbed wire around the United States Capitol due to this fear.

QANON AND FOLIE À DEUX/SHARED DELUSIONAL DISORDER: IS THERAPY POSSIBLE?

The two most common forms of *therapy* for people suffering from Shared Delusional Disorder are personal and family therapy (Shimizu, Kubota, & Toichi, 2007). Personal therapy is one-on-one counseling that focuses on building a relationship between the counselor and the patient and aims to create a positive environment where the patient feels that they can speak freely and truthfully. This is advantageous because the counselor can usually get more information out of the patient to get a better idea of how to help them if that patient feels safe and trusts them. Additionally, if the patient trusts what the counsellor says disproving the delusion will be easier.

Family therapy is a technique in which the entire family comes into therapy together to work on their relationships and to find ways to eliminate the delusion within the family dynamic.

If one applied this to QAnon, who is to serve as the therapist or counselor? Also, can the QAnon followers be viewed as a "family" of sorts and be dealt with accordingly? The authors' offer that perhaps the therapist in this context could possibly be those who are fighting misinformation and fact checking

ridiculous assertions from followers of this movement. Also, perhaps as members of this “family” leave the movement and recognize the false reality that they have been following may encourage their kin to leave as well.

CONCLUSION: RAMIFICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

Plato’s Cave, in this context, is no longer prisoners “chained to their falsehoods” but a tactic used by some to weaponize these prisoners and encourage them to commit acts of mass violence. In a free-thinking society, disinformation has shown itself also as a weapon of potential mass destruction.

While propaganda is not new, the modern tactics at play are alarming as beliefs are being weaponized to encourage individuals to attack American political platforms and democratic values. That people are being used and manipulated unbeknownst to them is infuriating to those who are on the outside of such influence but can see the damage caused.

Reality testing (Hart, 1991) is a trusted and effective feature of psychotherapy that uses logic to suggest other possibilities to one’s false belief system. Reality testing may be what is happening currently as the presidency of Joe Biden continues. The big predictions made by “Q” have not occurred and former President Trump has not enacted this expected “Storm”. Perhaps this is what is required at this moment to deal with the QAnon problem in the United States. However, Americans need to be aggressive with the prevention of disinformation campaigns knowing what results from doing nothing. Without continued efforts to mitigate the false information perpetuated by some, the United States will continue to see more dangerous events such as the insurrection attempt to block a lawful and fair election on January 6, 2021.

Using Plato’s *Allegory of the Cave* again, when does it become the responsibility of the public to help draw “light into the cave”? Current attempts do not seem to be working with many in the United States. Obviously, a different kind of information campaign is needed. While continuous Public Service Announcements and other fact-checking efforts may not be the entire answer to addressing the threat of QAnon, there is a responsibility to address those in the “dark.” Limiting speech is a last resort and one to exercise with caution.

It must also be remembered that foreign adversaries are reaching into “the cave” to embolden these “prisoners” with memes and campaigns of their own to cause attacks against democracy in America. The internet being a venue unlike any other and appearing lawless and unregulated many times is still finding its place in this entire issue.

The problem is that QAnon may have much more stamina than many believe. The following are some of the characteristics of this group which are extremely difficult to address (Aliapoulios, Papisavva, Ballard, De Cristofaro, Stringhini, Zannettou, & Blackburn, 2021; Garry, Rukaya, Mohammed, 2021; Amarasingam & Argentino, 2020):

- QAnon has developed much like a “new religion” and religions have a very strong staying power, moreover followers place faith above accuracy
- Research suggests that some people are unusually predisposed to accept implausible conspiratorial beliefs even when the beliefs are extremely contradictory
- Once one starts seeing the world as a massive interconnected conspiracy controlled by “the elite” it is extremely difficult to get them to change their minds

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- The QAnon movement has become a well-practiced ecosystem that reflexively shifts the goalposts to keep followers engaged
- The QAnon movement is getting more and more imbedded in the Republican Party, even seeing its followers being elected into congress and political positions
- QAnon offers purpose, direction, and mooring for many in a country that seems threatening, and offers insider knowledge of a “plan” on how it will be dealt
- There is already evidence that some QAnon followers have been recruited by or are blending in with more militant extremist movements which already have many members
- QAnon has embedded in many the idea that every official narrative and mainstream institution is inherently suspect, and that real knowledge is produced by like-minded strangers working together on the internet to “do their own research,” thus making people vulnerable to false narratives and fake news

Some argue that former President Donald Trump brought out the worst in many Americans just prior to and during his term of office from 2016 to 2020. Others offer that he simply made it appear that racist, bigoted, unintelligent, false beliefs and actions were acceptable in government and in society. Some say that he just made it acceptable to be the worst one can be as a human.

QAnon is a symptom of a much worse disease in American society. A disease that has existed throughout our evolution, one that is always underground and hidden, but surfaces in various ways. At periods of time, racist, bigoted, unintelligent, false beliefs and actions have been accepted by most people in the United States. It appears that American may be seeing a new “period of acceptance” with an uncomfortably large segment of the American population.

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