

Democratic Propaganda

This paper is an attempt to develop an account of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s justification for and use of, what I will call, democratic propaganda – truthful propaganda that is aimed at promoting and fostering democratic political action by stirring the emotions. Interpreting it in light of his broader work, I argue that King's famous "Letter from Birmingham Jail" is a piece of democratic propaganda. In doing so, I give an account of what led King to support the use of democratic propaganda and why he hoped it would help to overcome a central problem in the civil rights movement: namely, the political inaction of white moderates such as President John F. Kennedy. As I will try to show, King's understanding of propaganda differs from those that have already been discussed by Melvin Rogers, Jason Stanley, and Robert Gooding-Williams. In emphasizing shame – rather than empathy, as Rogers and Stanley do, or beauty, as Robert Gooding-Williams does – King offers us a distinct view of democratic propaganda. This isn't to say that King would deny that propaganda can be used to stimulate empathy or that beauty has a role to play, but rather that there are other ways that propaganda can do its democratic work.