

Martin Luther King, Jr. on Democratic Propaganda, Shame, and Moral Transformation

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Abstract (167 words): This paper develops 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 readers' emotions. I interpret King's famous "Letter from Birmingham Jail" in the broader context of his work and argue that it is a piece of democratic propaganda. 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: the political inaction of the white moderates. King emphasizes *shame* in the Letter, and I argue that this concept offers us a new way of thinking about the efficacy of democratic propaganda. I close by considering the relevance of King's approach for today's Black Lives Matter movement. Despite the innovativeness of King's use of shame, I suggest it may be time for a new approach to Black politics and activism.

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On April 12, 1963, Martin Luther King, Jr. was arrested in Birmingham, Alabama, for violating an injunction against “mass street parades or mass processions or like demonstrations without a permit.” During his time in jail, King wrote his famous “Letter from Birmingham Jail” (2000e)¹ in response to the recent “Call for Unity” made by eight clergymen (“White Clergymen” 1963). However, the Letter was also aimed at a second audience: “white moderates” outside the church, including members of the Kennedy Administration and the editorial boards of major newspapers and magazines, such as the *New York Times* and *Time* magazine.² Although this group of white moderates explicitly agreed that racial segregation was wrong, they had not themselves joined the movement, and they preached moderation and gradual progress, advising King and his supporters not to demonstrate but to engage in “open and honest” discussion and wait patiently for the courts to end racial segregation (“White Clergymen” 1963). King rightly saw this as asking him to continue to accept injustice, exploitation, and indignity (1997b).

The political inaction of the white moderates was an ongoing problem for King. He knew he needed the support of at least some of the more powerful white moderates to create political change. He also knew that reasoning with them was, in itself, unlikely to convince them to join the movement; they already knew that racism was wrong. What he needed was something that would spur them to *act* on this knowledge. He, therefore, used a series of rhetorical strategies to convince them of the need for direct action and to motivate them to actually participate in the movement. These strategies had long included appealing to Biblical stories, invoking the Declaration of Independence, encouraging his readers to imagine and hope for a better world, appealing to moral truth and the potential for moral progress, and reminding readers of the moral necessity of keeping one’s promises.

¹ The “Letter from Birmingham Jail” will hereinafter be referred to as “the Letter” in the text.

² *Time* deemed the Birmingham demonstrations “poorly timed” (*Time* 1963). The *New York Times* editorialized, “We do not expect that there will be overnight rejection of the policies that caused so much distress to the Negro community . . . and Dr. King . . . ought not expect it either” (New York Times 1963, A40).

In the Letter, King added another technique to his arsenal: shame. Consider this memorable passage:

I must confess that over the past few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizens' Council or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to "order" than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says: "I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I cannot agree with your methods of direct action"; who paternalistically believes he can set the timetable for another man's freedom; who lives by a mythical concept of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait for a "more convenient season." Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection (2000e, 96-97).

Here, King articulates his disappointment in white moderates, inviting them to recognize their moral failings and to do better. The Letter aimed to evoke white moderates' sense of shame to make them feel "the fierce urgency of now" and to lead them to join the movement (King 1991, 217-218).

This paper develops an account of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s justification for and use of what I call "democratic propaganda"—truthful propaganda aimed at promoting and fostering democratic political action by stirring the emotions. I position King's famous "Letter from Birmingham Jail" in the context of his broader oeuvre and argue that it is a piece of democratic propaganda. I also offer an account of why King believed that democratic propaganda would help to overcome a central problem in the civil rights movement: the political inaction of the white moderates. As we will see, King's version of democratic propaganda relies heavily on moral shame.

This paper is particularly significant for those who are interested in King's philosophical thought. Currently, many scholars view the Letter as a rational argument meant to persuade

the white moderates of the justness of civil disobedience.³ This is certainly true, but I argue that the Letter is more than that. It is also a “sensible sermon,” blending both intellectual and emotional appeals; it seeks to show white moderates how urgent the need for political action is, and to move them to take that necessary action. King used the Letter to hold up a mirror to white moderates’ betrayal of their stated principles in order to stimulate a sense of shame in his readers. He hoped this experience of shame would spur the “best” of them to make a moral transformation, to root out the rationalizations, biases, and prejudices that were preventing many white moderates from supporting and joining in the civil rights movement. While others have noted that King’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail” is a form of sermon,⁴ no previous scholarship has examined his views about the sermon alongside his views on propaganda. When read together, we can see that the Letter, as a sensible sermon, is in fact a piece of (democratic) propaganda.⁵

My argument here is also relevant to debates about propaganda within mainstream philosophy. Much of the current philosophical discussion of propaganda focuses only on its problems, particularly its use by totalitarian and authoritarian regimes. For example, while Jason Stanley’s recent and well-known work on the topic in *How Propaganda Works* does consider the democratic potential of propaganda, it explicitly focuses on its role in supporting demagoguery (2015). However, there is a longstanding tradition in Black political thought that emphasizes propaganda’s democratic potential. As Melvin Lee Rogers (2012), Jason Stanley (2015, 111-117), and Robert Gooding-Williams (2021) have noted, Du Bois held that propaganda has a distinctively “democratic” character. According to Rogers and Stanley, Du Bois saw democratic propaganda as expanding people’s moral horizons, offering them a wider view of the world and their place in it. They read *Souls of Black Folk* as this kind of democratic propaganda, arguing that DuBois attempt to expand “the people’s” view of themselves. In “Criteria of Negro Art,” Du Bois explicitly states that “Art is propaganda and ever must be.”

³ For a detailed discussion of the role that King’s letter plays in philosophical discussions of civil disobedience, both in John Rawls’s interpretation of the “Letter” and more generally, see Livingston (2020, 702-704).

⁴ A few others have suggested that the Letter was a form of sermon (Mott 1975; Snow 1985).

⁵ Paul Taylor (2018), Gooding-Williams’s (2018), and Meena Krishnamurthy (2015) have written about the emotional aspects of King’s writings. None of these pieces explicitly claim that the Letter is a piece of propaganda.

Artists produce and disseminate a moral vision, depicting “goodness in all its aspects of justice, honor and right . . . as the one true method of gaining sympathy and human interest.” This same argument is made by Claude McKay, a key literary figure of the Harlem Renaissance. McKay argued, specifically in relation to the Civil Rights movement, that propaganda can be used for democratic purposes—as a form of counter-propaganda, used to “gain the sympathy of the broad-visioned international white groups whose international opponents are also the intransigent enemies of Negro progress” (McKay 1923).

I argue that King was part of this longstanding tradition of Black political thought, but, as I show here, his understanding of democratic propaganda differs from the accounts of Du Bois, McKay, and Stanley, which place their greatest emphasis on empathy (or “sympathy”). King’s theory, I show, relies as much on shame as it does on empathy. Any theory of democratic propaganda must explain how it can lead to the abandonment of undemocratic ideologies; King, I argue, sees shame as motivating critical self-reflection, which can stimulate the abandonment of white supremacist ideology.

This paper proceeds as follows. In section 2, I give a brief account of “affected ignorance” and the related phenomena of rationalization and bad faith, which King believed were the causes of the white moderate’s political passivity. In section 3, I argue that, on King’s view, democratic propaganda, in the form of a “sensible sermon,” can overcome affected ignorance. In section 4, I discuss the role of shame and self-loathing in King’s democratic propaganda. In section 5, I explain what is distinctive about King’s views on shame and why he believed appealing to shame was more effective than appealing to empathy. I close, in section 6, by considering the relevance of King’s approach for today’s Movement for Black Lives. Despite the innovativeness of King’s use of shame, I suggest it may be time for a new approach to Black politics and activism.

§2. Affected Ignorance

Some might suppose the conflict between King and the white moderates was about whether the white moderates really believed that racial segregation was wrong. But King held that everyone, even the segregationists, knew that it was wrong (“Playboy Interview” 1965, 6).

He took the white moderates at their word when they explicitly stated that racial segregation was wrong and should be ended. Others might imagine that the disagreement was about tactics—about which actions should be taken to end racial segregation. After all, white moderates were asking King not to demonstrate or engage in boycotts and arguing that other tactics such as waiting for legal remedy were more effective. But, in fact, what King objected to was the white moderates' political inaction, plain and simple.⁶

What explained this inaction? King runs through several possibilities. Perhaps the white moderates simply *did not know how wrong it was*. He suggests in *Where Do We Go From Here*, that if they knew how wrong it was, they would have known that *immediate* political action was morally required (King 1967, 90). Yet, it seems impossible that they did not know: mandated segregation of public schools, public transportation, and public spaces such as restrooms, restaurants, and drinking fountains were all highly visible every day in public, and all seem clear evidence of the moral rot at the basis of racial segregation.

King considers that some Southern whites may not have understood the full wrongness of segregation because Black people they were in contact with (strategically) performed acceptance of racial segregation. King certainly understood why Black people might engage in such performances—their lives and livelihoods were often at stake—but he worried that these performances inadvertently shored up the ideological mystification of Jim Crow, allowing whites to believe that resistance to racial segregation must be the work of “outside agitators” (2010, 11-20; 31-41). This is, in part, why King believed so fervently in engaging in creative “nonconformity” rather than submission or acquiescence. After the Freedom Rides, sit-ins, boycotts, and marches, King thought, white Americans must be able to see that Jim Crow was wrong and in need of urgent remedy.

Yet, even in the face of this growing Civil Rights Movement, many white moderates continued to counsel patience. In the end, King believed, white moderates' political inaction was produced by, what we can call, a kind of “affected ignorance” (Moody-Adams 1994, 294)

⁶ As Jonathan Reider (2014, 53) explains, the call for direct action “was not a repudiation of negotiation but their midwife.” As King (2000e, 89-90) wrote: “The purpose of our direct action program is to create a situation so crisis packed that it will inevitably open the door to negotiation.”

that was founded in motivated (or self-interested) reasoning and ideology.⁷ While white moderates now understood precisely how wrong racial segregation was, they also knew that acting on this injustice would mean giving up practices and structures that benefitted them. They blinded themselves to the full truth of segregation's wrongness.⁸

In King's later writings about the white moderate backlash in the North (1967, 71-107) he suggested that many white moderates were committed to white supremacy for the same reason that the slave owners and the segregationists of the South were: because of the benefits it conferred upon whiteness. He often talked about the "strange duality" of the white moderates, the split between their belief that racial segregation was wrong and their lack of political action to end it (King 1967, 82). King wrote, "we can see the developing dilemma of white America: the haunting ambivalence, the intellectual and moral recognition that slavery is wrong, but the emotional tie to the system so deep and pervasive that it imposes an inflexible unwillingness to root it out" (1967, 81).

Certainly, some of the white moderates' ties to segregation were emotional and affective. As King put it, "often white liberals are unaware of their latent prejudices" (1967, 94). As an example of this latent emotional attachment to white supremacy, King pointed out that Lincoln (then a state legislator) was referring to the injustice and impracticality of slavery as early as 1837, but he did not take action until after the Civil War began in 1861. During this period of indecision, Lincoln also wrote of physical differences between Black individuals and white individuals, making it clear that he felt that white individuals were superior to Black individuals simply because of their skin color (King 2015, 260). Even the Great Emancipator himself harbored racist thoughts.

Just as Lincoln created rationalizations to cover up his self-interested motives and to allow him to ignore the moral imperative to end slavery, King suggested, white moderates rationalized their lack of action on racial segregation, that "not too distant cousin of slavery" (2010, 38). This type of rationalization is, as Lewis Gordon suggests, an intellectual evasion—a

⁷ On related phenomena see Charles Mills (2007, 11-38) and Anthony Appiah (1990).

⁸ Ida B. Wells suggests something similar (2014).

form of bad faith (Gordon 2000; Gordon 1999), in which individuals flee a displeasing truth for a pleasing falsehood (Gordon 1999, 8) and convince themselves that the falsehood is in fact true.

We can see King as distinguishing between two types of “bad faith” judgments: (i) the judgment that racial segregation is not wrong; and (ii) the judgment that immediate political action is not needed to alleviate racial segregation. The Letter is primarily addressed to white moderates, who he sees as engaging in the second type of bad faith judgment. While the white moderates recognize the injustice of racial segregation, they engaged in bad faith by attempting to rationalize their continued inaction. Bad faith, in this sense, is an attempt by white moderates to mystify their own agency and responsibility regarding racial segregation.

As evidence of the white moderate’s tendency toward rationalization and bad faith, let’s briefly look at the clergymen’s “Call for Unity” to which the Letter was putatively responding. The “Call for Unity” was an open letter rationalizing the clergy’s passivity by claiming to be in favour of social “order,” “calmness,” and “peace.” However, when we look at how these concepts are operationalized in their letter, we see rationalizations that relied on racist tropes and stereotypes of Black Americans as violent, disorderly, and rash. In the open letter, the clergymen urged Black Americans in the South “to unite locally in working peacefully for a better Birmingham”—somehow ignoring the fact that King was already staunchly committed to peaceful, nonviolent direct action. King saw nonviolent direct action as the middle position between complacency and violence (King 2000e, 100), but the clergymen referred to King’s nonviolent direct action—protests, marches, and sit-ins—as an “extreme measure.” This language plays on stereotypes of Black men and women as aggressive and violent, invoking readers’ fears that this “innate” aggression might be turned upon whites in retribution for racial injustice.

The clergymen also highlighted King’s status as an “outsider” (“White Clergymen” 1963)—the opposite of “local”—signaling his status as an other. Characterizing someone as an other is morally problematic when otherness is framed as negative. In this case, the term outsider implied that King differed from Birmingham residents (and other white readers of the “open letter”) in a negative way—in his values, beliefs, and behavior. This implication becomes especially clear when we look at how the open letter framed “community members,” or

insiders: the clergymen compliment the community members for being “responsible citizens” and for “the calm manner” in which they handled the demonstrations, and contrast this characterization with King’s “impatient” and “unwise” actions. This rhetorical opposition frames the action of white “community members” as calm and reflective and the Black protesters’ behavior as rash. The clergy so strongly came down on the side of local white people that they blamed King for “such actions as incite to hatred and violence,” rather than holding the violent white Birmingham police officers accountable.

Despite their positioning of the conflict in this highly polarized way, the clergymen claimed that racial segregation was profoundly unjust. They simply argued that in their historical moment, there was not much to be done about it—that time would be the only cure. This is a form of evasion or bad faith, because as King rightly noted, “time is neutral,” something that can be used destructively or constructively (2000e, 99). King suggested that the white clergymen’s “attitude stems from a tragic misconception of time, from the strangely irrational notion that there is something in the very flow of time that will inevitably cure all ills” (2000e, 99). In short, the moderate white clergymen used a variety of rationalizations and bad faith rhetorical tactics to justify their affected ignorance of the actual moral question at the heart of the events in Birmingham, and to excuse the fact that they counseled taking no action at all to end racial segregation.

While King believed the white moderates were most likely to be subject to bad faith, and focused his attention on them, he also worried that the Black middle class was prone to similar bad faith arguments. The Black middle class also counselled moderation, that is, continued patience and political inaction. King believed the Black middle class, who also benefitted from racial segregation, tried to “identify with the white majority, the white middle class,” driven by an unconscious hatred of themselves and that “psychologically” they rejected anything that reminded them of their heritage, of Africa, or of “the masses of Negroes” (King, 2017, 65). Blinded by ideologies of white supremacy and the politics of, what we would now call, Black respectability (Higginbotham 1999), the Black middle class, like the white moderates, became “insensitive to the problems of the masses” (King 2000e, 99). In the Letter, however, King focused his attentions on the white moderates, rather than the Black middle class, because

he knew that without the support and participation of at least a small minority of powerful white moderates, such as President John F. Kennedy, political change was unlikely (King 2017, 11).

As the clergymen's open letter only made clearer, powerful white moderates tended toward rationalization and were more likely to settle into a spirit of ignorant complacency than to support political change (King 1967, 9). This is why King argued that "freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed" (2000e, 91). He knew that Black Americans had never gained "a single right in America without persistent pressure and agitation" (King 2000e, 96). To work against this white complacency and encourage action, King used what he called "nonviolent pressure" to make it uncomfortable for white moderates to continue as they were (King 2000e, 91).

The Montgomery bus boycott was intentionally organized to induce discomfort with the status quo. In Montgomery, Alabama, 75 percent of passengers on the bus were Black Americans. King worked with the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA) to organize the Montgomery Bus Boycott—a form of economic nonviolent pressure. Without Black passengers, the bus company would have faced serious financial difficulties—even bankruptcy. The costs of political inaction became higher than the costs of action, and the buses were eventually desegregated. Boycotts work because they appeal to self-interest to induce moral behavior (Wilson 1961; Moody-Adams 2018, 284). Since the real reasons behind racial segregation were the benefits it conferred to white people, boycotts changed the stakes; they turned what is for white people an abstract moral question into a question of economic self-interest. But they did more than that. King, like Gandhi, believed that economic boycotts could also be used to "develop a sense of shame in the opponent, and thereby bring about a transformation and change of heart" (King 2005a, 234). As a minister, King never fully gave up hope that some white Americans would undergo a moral transformation with respect to racial justice, but he was a practical man who knew that there were many incentives for white moderates to continue affecting ignorance. As I will suggest in the next section, King believed that democratic propaganda – in the form of a sensible sermon – could also be used to induce moral shame and thus to pressure white moderates to overcome their affected ignorance.

§3. The “Sensible Sermon”

To understand King’s position on propaganda, we need to consider the broader context of his thinking. As King described it, within the church there were two different positions on the question of political motivation, “intellectualism” and “emotionalism.” Intellectualism is, roughly, the view that all that is needed for political motivation is propositional knowledge; emotionalism is the view that political motivation requires both propositional knowledge and emotions or desires. King believed that “toughminded” intellectualism was not likely to be enough to motivate white moderates.⁹ Following thinkers such as S. Radhakrishnan (King 1992, 315) and Frederick Douglass (1852), he believed that appeals to mere rationality were too cold and detached to capture people’s attention, especially when self-interested reasoning was at play. Rational arguments were unlikely, on their own, to overcome rationalization (c.f., Stanley 2015, 81-124). However, King also wished to avoid the emotionalism of the (white) Church, whose excessive focus on emotions ignored rationality, making its adherents vulnerable to errors (2000b, 375; King 1997a, 472). He worried that these churches “confused overt emotionalism with the true holy spirit.” According to King, while emotion could be “uplifting” (1992, 314-315) and could lead to bold and determined political action, it should be accompanied by rationality; for him, the white churches’ “misinterpretation of the holy spirit has caused many to fail to see the value of a *sensible sermon*” (King 2007e, 223).

The sensible sermon was King’s solution to the problems of rationalism and emotionalism: this rhetorical genre combined both positions, bringing together head and heart in order to encourage political action among white moderates (King 2010, 2): This notion is deeply rooted in King’s theology. As he pointed out,

Jesus reminds us that the good life combines the toughness of the serpent and the tenderness of the dove. To have serpentlike qualities devoid of dovelike qualities is to be passionless, mean, and selfish. To have dovelike qualities

⁹ Ida B. Wells (2014, 58) and early Du Bois (1898, 9) also worked within the “intellectualist” tradition.

without serpentlike qualities is to be sentimental, anemic, and aimless. We must combine strongly marked antitheses (King 2010, 6).

King believed that what he called the “sensible sermon” was one practical way to lead people toward realizing this synthesis of moral qualities.

In King’s class notes for “Preparation of the Sermon” (2007b) he defined the components of a sermon and discussed how each of these parts could serve the goal of creating this synthesis. For King, the sermon’s theme was “the thing you are saying to the people” (its rational argument) and its purpose was what “you expect to accomplish in your particular sermon” —for him, a call to action, an attempt “to get people to see, do, or be something” (2007b, 81, fn 1). The sermon’s conclusion was a recapitulation, “bringing the audience to a place where there is emotional impact” (King, 2007b, 81, fn 1). Note this combination: rationality and emotional impact, leading (most importantly) to action. Or, as King put it in another context, sermons (a form of worship) needed three components: an “upward look” toward God; an “inward look” toward ourselves in relation to God; and an “outward look” toward others, materialized through service (2007b, 81, fn 1). For King, “worship at its best” was a concrete action: “What doth the Lord requ[i]re of thee but to do justly, love[,] mercy” (2007f, 351). King’s sermons, like his writings and his political actions, were an expression of “worship at its best.” King’s goal in all of these activities was to create an emotional impact in order to move people toward the realistic realization of justice and truth in this world.

With all of this in mind, King’s “sensible sermon” can be understood as a form of propaganda. The term “propaganda” was originally associated with propagating or spreading the Christian faith,¹⁰ and King’s writings treat the sermon as a form of propaganda. At Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, in a sermon called “Propagandizing Christianity,” King noted that “for the average person, the word propaganda has evil and vicious overtones” (2007c, 184) but that propaganda need not be viewed so: “There is a noble sense in which propaganda can be used” (2007c, 184). In this sermon, King argued that when Jesus asked Christians to bear witness to the “uttermost part of the earth,” he was calling upon his “disciples to be true propagandizers”

¹⁰ The word was coined by Pope Gregory XV in 1622 to refer to the “congregiade propaganda,” which was an organization of the Roman curia that had jurisdiction over missionary territories (Tuttle 2002, 16-17).

(2007c, 185): “to go out and talk” about Christianity (2007c, 185). According to King, then, propaganda is, in part, “an attempt to disseminate principles or ideas by organized effort” (2007c, 185).

King’s endorsement of propaganda may strike some as problematic, because it has historically been used to deceive. But, as King points out, Christians were commanded by Christ to use propaganda to spread the moral truth:

Never underestimate the power of words. (Adve[r]tizing has discovered it; Hitler disco[r]ved it). If Hitler could do all of this with an evil idea it seems that we could rock the world with the truth of the saving power of the gospel. If the advertizers can convince the men that they can[’]t do without their products, we ought to be able to convince men of the productive power of God in Christ (2007c, 185).

According to King, the deciding factor in whether propaganda is good or bad is the merit of the cause being urged (2007c, 184-185, fn. 2). The tactics are the same whether it is used for moral or immoral purposes, but when it is used for truth and justice, it is morally good. Propaganda, whether used for evil (like that used by Hitler and advertisers) or for good (like that used by and endorsed by King himself), was not just “talk”—it was talk imbued with emotion, aimed at arousing matching emotions in its hearers in order to change and shape their behavior, to move them to social, political, and economic action.

King believed that, as Christians, his hearers should use propaganda for essentially democratic purposes—to lead people to work toward racial justice and to end racial oppression. King explicitly linked propaganda to the inherently democratic aim of integration, writing, “when our government takes this matter seriously it will continue to use its constitutional authority to end the system of segregation. But it will go beyond this. Through the Department of Health, Welfare and Education it will carry on an active program of propaganda to promote the idea of integration” (King 2005c, 507). For King, integration is central to a democratic society that was founded on the principle that all men are created equal. This principle is the “sacred recognition” of the inherent worth and dignity of the human personality, a conviction stemming from the political and religious heritage of America (King

1986, 118). There is no graded scale of worth, no divine right of one race that differs from the another (King 1986, 119), for every individual was created in the image of God and has etched in her personality the “indelible stamp of the Creator” (King 1986, 119). In King’s view, slavery and segregation stand in diametric opposition to this principle of the sacredness of human individuality (1986, 119). They prevent our “democratic and Christian health from being realized” (King 2005c, 507). Thus, Christians have a moral duty to promote racial integration, and they can be urged to fulfill this moral duty through the sensible sermon as propaganda.

In light of this discussion, we can see that King’s Letter is not simply a rational argument for engaging in direct action to end racial segregation. As I mentioned, King doubted that mere rational argumentation could effectively move white moderates to forego the benefits of white supremacy and join the movement. The Letter was therefore a combination of rational argument and appeal to emotion—a “sensible sermon” to the white moderates, a piece of truthful and democratic propaganda. It appealed to the reader’s intellect *and* emotions in order to lead them to action.

Through his Christian notion of propaganda, King operationalized his middle position between emotionalism and intellectualism: the sensible sermon was a way to avoid the irrationality of emotionalism while also avoiding the cold-heartedness and detachment of intellectualism—to awaken people’s emotions, then guide them by the lodestar of moral truth to right action. By using the sermon as a form of truthful democratic propaganda, King hoped to bring together hearts and minds and thereby to move white moderates to join the movement for civil rights.

§4. Shame and Self-Loathing

As Moody-Adams argues, King understood that racial progress required the expansion of “perceptual space—to dislodge prejudices and habits of belief that limit our ability to take a novel view of the world, our place in it, and our relationships to others” (Moody-Adams 2018, 278). King’s “sensible sermon” was an attempt to broaden the white moderates’ view and help them see more clearly, in part by inducing a sense of shame in his white moderate readers. As I will show, this shame was meant to help white moderates see more clearly in three ways: to

see themselves as failing to meet their own moral standards; to see others, particularly Black Americans, as having moral authority to call them on their failures; and to see racial segregation as an urgent situation requiring immediate political action.

King begins the Letter by dismissing the idea that, as an “outsider,” he should not be in Birmingham. For one thing, he was not an outsider; as the leader of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, King had organizational ties in Birmingham, and these organizations had invited him to come. King thus opens by establishing his moral authority. Next, he enumerates the hypocrisies of white moderates: their characterization of his political activities as “unwise and untimely” while ignoring the appalling conditions that led to these activities (King 2000e, 85); their calls for negotiation while disparaging King’s attempts to foster it via nonviolent direct action (which aimed to force opponents to the negotiating table) (King 2000e, 89); and, finally, their breaking of their promise to improve conditions in Birmingham.

In the course of the negotiations aimed at averting an economic boycott, certain promises were made by the merchants—for example, to remove the stores’ humiliating racial signs. On the basis of these promises, the Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth and the leaders of the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights agreed to a moratorium on all demonstrations. As the weeks and months went by, we realized that we were the victims of a broken promise. A few signs, briefly removed, returned; the others remained (King 2000e, 88).

Given the flouting of these agreements, civil rights activists felt that direct action was their only remaining option: “We had no alternative except to prepare for direct action, whereby we would present our very bodies as a means of laying our case before the conscience of the local and the national community” (King 2000e, 88). King’s Letter focuses on the hypocrisy of the white moderates—the way that they were “tragically divided against” themselves. With their promises and moral commitments on one side and their complicity with white supremacy on the other (2010, 32); his solution was to activate “the conscience of the local” community, to force them “to match words with actions” (2010, 32).

This is King’s purpose in calling out the hypocrisy—the divided mind—of the white moderate: to induce shame in his audience. Paul Taylor suggests that shame is an appropriate

response to “self-criticism, especially as these highlight the gaps between professed commitments and actual practice” (Taylor 2018, 42). Because the ignorance of the white moderates is, in part, affected (a result of rationalization and bad faith), King sought to hold up a mirror to the motives and actions of white moderate readers in order to foster self-criticism and “develop a sense of shame in the opponent, and thereby bring about a transformation and change of heart” (2005a, 234). Shame was thus another form of nonviolent pressure, this time moral and social rather than economic: King believed that whenever shame “is used in a matter that stirs a community’s, or a nation’s, anguished conscience, then the pressure of public opinion becomes an ally in your just cause” (“Playboy Interview” 1965, 3). This sense of shame would, King hoped, pressure the “best” of the white moderates to join and support the movement for Black civil rights.

King sees shame as an appropriate response to our failure to “measure up” to what is “expected” of us (2000b, 443). Although King did not explain how the shame he evoked might motivate political action, other works in moral and political psychology fill the gap. John Rawls suggests that shame is painful, for it is the loss of an especially valuable good—our self-respect (1999, 388-391). Rawls argues that shame is peculiarly indicative of a failure to achieve self-command and its attendant excellences of strength, courage, and self-control. According to him, this diminishes our sense of self-respect, because we know that having these excellences will help us to meet our commitments, which is good for ourselves (Rawls 1999, 388-391; c.f. Williams 85-90). When we commit wrongs that show the absence of these qualities, we are likely to experience painful feelings of shame. And we are especially likely to feel shame when others see our weaknesses. As Rawls notes, when a person cheats or otherwise fails to meet his commitments, he should feel “ashamed because by resorting to such means he has convicted himself in his own eyes (and in those of others) as weak and untrustworthy” (1999, 422; c.f. Williams 1993, 90). When white moderates failed to meet their stated commitment to ending racial segregation, they failed to live up to both their own standards and ideals and those of King and his supporters, who shared a mutual commitment to ending racial segregation (Williams, 1993; Rawls 1999, 422).

The shame of others seeing us fail to meet our commitments is especially powerful. To use Stephen Darwall's terminology, shame is "third personal" (2006, 71): when we are ashamed we see ourselves as an object of the other person's regard, or "gaze" (Williams 1993,71). Shame is painful because it reveals to us an aspect of ourselves that we would rather not see; not only does the other person see us in this way, but we know that they do so correctly (Darwall 2006, 125). They have correctly identified—and led us to see—our moral weakness or flaw (Buss 1999, 527). Shame, says Darwall, feels as if the other person can see us as we really are—"as if she has this competence and authority" to do so (2006, 125).

Shame is not merely third personal, however. In the case of Martin Luther King, Jr. and the white moderates, it is also second personal. As Darwall describes it, "the second-person standpoint" is "the perspective you and I take up when we make and acknowledge claims on one another's conduct and will" (2006, 3)—when we, for example, agree on a moral principle and a course of action. This is why Sarah Buss argues that shame involves what we might call recognition respect (1999, 526). To respect someone is to recognize her authority and standing to make moral demands on you. When we are ashamed, we implicitly recognize the authority of the other person's evaluative perspective; we acknowledge the other person's authority to judge us, or make a claim upon us about the significance of our own actions. To feel that they have this authority over us, we must "affirm" the respected person's viewpoint, although it is not conditional upon our own point of view (Buss 1999, 526). In other words, we must recognize that our personal resources cannot determine all of our reasons for action—we must acknowledge that interpersonal relationships also affect our decisions about how to act (Buss 1999, 526).

Shame's connection to respect may explain what King saw as shame's power to disrupt the ideology of white supremacy, which motivated the white moderates' passivity. Recall that white supremacy is an ideology that is used by the white moderates to process their contradictory beliefs regarding the practice of racial segregation—"it is morally wrong, but it benefits me." As Charles Mills and Jason Stanley suggest, ideologies are often fact resistant. The ideology of white supremacy helps them to override moral beliefs that tell against racial segregation, thereby resolving the contradiction between self-interest and morality.

When white moderates experience shame, it is in part because they accept King's moral authority to make claims about their failure to meet certain shared moral and political ideals and standards. In experiencing shame, the white moderates enact respect for both King and the Black citizens he represents—an implicit recognition that Black Americans hold equal moral status to white Americans. Shame thus leads white moderates to think and act in ways that contradict the ideology of white supremacy (which rests on the idea that Black people are inferior). The hope is that this experience of respect for Black Americans is the first thread of an unravelling ball, and that further similar experiences will undo the knot of white supremacy.

Since the ideology of white supremacy is central to the process of rationalization, weakening the commitment to the ideology makes it more difficult for white moderates to engage in the kind of rationalization they need to justify their passivity. The white moderates will be left with reasons to engage in immediate action to end racial segregation: once white supremacy is undone, ending racial segregation becomes a priority. Shame has a temporal effect. King's hope is that once their rationalizations are eliminated, thus countering the tendency to wait, the white moderates' response will be immediate.

Because King was well aware that white moderates would prefer to continue to affect ignorance, he placed great importance on publicizing the Letter widely. It was not addressed to the eight clergymen who wrote the "Call for Unity," nor was it ever sent to them directly. Instead, it was published as an open letter in a variety of popular venues. Making the Letter public invited local, national, and global discussion and ensured that people could not avoid or hide from its moral condemnation. The attention it received only highlighted that the democratic creed that was being professed but ignored by white moderates was in fact the creed of decent and liberal peoples, both in the United States and around the world. This could only have heightened the shame the white moderates felt, for they had both violated their own moral commitments and those of others outside of the United States. A heightened sense of shame—especially when there are constant reminders of one's grounds for shame—makes the motivation to engage in self-change even greater than it might otherwise be.

This motivation was intensified by Black activists' reminders of Black rage at current circumstances. As Rogers notes, Du Bois "invokes the danger of bitterness" from Black

Americans in order to make clear the political importance of “sympathetic identification” and “the necessity of active transformation” from whites, who wish to avoid Black bitterness and its possible expressions (2012, 201). Like Du Bois, King also highlighted the potential consequences of ignoring his call for support and participation from white moderates. Recall that King saw nonviolent direct action as lying in the middle between complacency and violence. He makes clear in the “Letter” that complacency is no longer an option; as he says, Black Americans “can’t wait” any longer. The question is what form white moderates’ political action should take. King makes clear that without the right response from white moderates, including significant legal and political change, “bitterness and hatred” among Black individuals could lead to violence (2000e, 100). King aims to rouse white moderates’ fear by implicitly alluding to the threat of violence represented by Malcolm X and his supporters. King hoped that when this fear was combined with shame, it would lead to genuine change.

King, a theological and philosophical perfectionist, believed that shame and self-loathing, combined with a commitment to the work of self-transformation, could lead to the kind of structural transformation that was needed for racial progress (Taylor 2018, 41). As Taylor notes, democracy’s ability to transform itself is foundational to sustaining itself, for democracy will always be in “danger of ossification or corruption, and therefore of losing the ability to support and defend the populace” (2018, 41). To ensure that it does not ossify, citizens need “to remain dissatisfied with things as they stand, and to remain open to the possibility that justice will require reconstructing both society and the self” (Taylor 2018, 41). In writing the Letter—a piece of democratic propaganda—King appealed to the fundamentally democratic idea of transforming society by transforming the self. He hoped to foster the white moderate’s sense of shame and self-loathing, to force them to take an honest look at themselves, see how they had failed to meet their commitments, and to be moved by this reflection to change themselves by beginning to engage in the concerted work needed to end racial segregation.

I have argued that King used the Letter as a sensible sermon to elicit shame in the white moderates. Earlier, I briefly mentioned that King believed that there was another way to cause white Americans to feel shame. Are the two uses of shame analogous? The answer is both yes

and no. King believed that nonviolent direct action such as boycotts could be used to “awaken within the oppressor a sense of moral shame” and lead to a change of heart among them (2000a, 177). The hope was that the shame elicited by boycotts, like that elicited by the Letter, would undermine white supremacy. King suggested that boycotts elicited shame specifically by letting the oppressor “know that we don’t like how we are being treated” (2000a, 177) and by challenging the oppressor’s “false sense of superiority” by reminding them that Black Americans had significant economic power (2000c, 190). Boycotts and other forms of nonviolent direct action also challenge the idea that Black Americans are passive and lacking in agency, making it clear that Black people have values and preferences that they are willing to demand forcefully through their bodies. Through “the power of bodies and souls,” boycotts reinforce the shame that is conveyed in writings such as the Letter.

Why are nonviolent actions – boycotts, protests, marches – necessary, if the same kind of shame can be stimulated through writings and speeches? Part of the answer is that nonviolent direct action had other uses besides shaming white people. In various writings, King suggests that nonviolent direct action was also meant to help Black Americans overcome their own internalized sense of shame (Locke 2016, 32). King famously argued that “the nonviolent approach does not immediately change the heart of the oppressor. It first does something to the hearts and souls of those committed to it. It gives them new self-respect; it calls up resources of strength and courage they did not know they had” (King 2005b, 423). King believed that too many Black Americans were “ashamed of themselves, ashamed of being [B]lack” (2000d, 123). He believed that Black Americans needed to “rise up and say from the bottom of his soul, ‘I am somebody. . . I have a rich, noble, and proud heritage. However exploited and however painful my history has been, I’m black, but I’m black and beautiful’” (2000d, 123). Overcoming the myth of racial inferiority that had been entrenched by centuries of slavery and racial segregation was no easy task. Nonviolent direct action, however, was key, in King’s view, to overcoming Black shame. Engaging in boycotts, marches, and protests, gave Black people a sense of “legitimate pride” (2002, 173) and furthered a sense of dignity among them. Perhaps writing and direct action were equally effective at shaming white people, but participation in

nonviolent direct action does much more for Black people than mere writings and speeches could.

§5. Why Shame Rather than Empathy?

Jason Stanley has argued that democratic propaganda—what he calls “civic rhetoric”—can help to promote reasonable deliberation through appeals to empathy. To be reasonable “is to take one’s proposals to be accountable to everyone in the community,” to consider perspectives that differ from one’s own, including those that are typically marginalized—those of “everyone in the community” (Stanley 2015, 108). According to Stanley, this empathy—“the capacity to put oneself in another’s shoes” —is a second personal attitude. Ideally, it involves looking at the other person’s perspective from her own point of view, not our own, and seeing it as providing us with reasons for action, which is crucial to reasonableness (Stanley 2015, 108). Like King, he believes that rational argumentation alone is unlikely to move people to seek out marginalized perspectives. He argues that propaganda is the only means of evoking this empathy with the marginalized, which is necessary for reasonable democratic debate. While King holds that propaganda can bring reason and emotion together, Stanley articulates this synthesis differently: for him, propaganda typically bypasses rationality, but it can lead to the recognition of reasons that support an ideal and thus to rational support for that ideal.

Of course, King’s Letter does encourage white readers to empathize with Black Americans. In his explanation of “why he can’t wait,” he gives the reader a memorable account of the suffering he endures as a result of racial segregation, listing both the large-scale racial violence enacted on Black people (lynching, police brutality) and the personal, small-scale violences (having to explain segregation and racism to your children, being constantly reminded of Jim Crow by signs, being so far disrespected that you are treated like a placeholder rather than given your real name as an individual). This prompts white readers to empathize or imagine what life is like for King as an individual, and by extension, for the entire group of Black Americans. King’s vivid portrayal of these pains, indignities, and violences invites his white readers to walk in his shoes, to imaginatively experience what it was like for him and other Black people in America to live under Jim Crow. Here, King’s goal was to stimulate empathy—to

draw readers' attention toward other people (in this case toward Black Americans). His hope was that empathy could lead white moderates to see the flaws of white supremacy and, ultimately, to discard it as a flawed ideology, making their wrongdoing apparent to themselves.

While King believed that empathy could help democratic propaganda do its motivational work, he must also have seen empathy's weaknesses. Perhaps most dangerously, empathy may be more likely to lead to rationalization than shame. On its own, empathy misidentifies the problem. The problem with the white moderate's attachment to white supremacy isn't that she doesn't know that racism is wrong or that she doesn't realize that racism causes Black suffering. White supremacy is not an epistemic gap; it cannot be rectified by showing the reality of Black suffering in hopes that white moderates will a) identify with it; and b) act differently in response. Insofar as King sees the inaction of the white moderates as a result of "affected ignorance," then the problem is that white moderates refuse to deal with what they already know and to act differently on the basis of this knowledge. Empathy may only lead to further rationalizations; the discomfort caused by the gap between one's empathy and one's lack of action can cause the person to resist and reject one or the other of these two incompatible opposites—to rationalize away either the empathy (by engaging in victim blaming or fixating on tactics) or the call to action (by engaging in moral distancing, disavowing responsibility, and expressing powerlessness). This is why, as Stanley acknowledges, simply showing white people the "Black perspective" and asking them to identify with it will not work. "An indirect method is required to stir white interest, one that appeals to 'white folk'" (2015, 64).

Christopher Lebron's *Color of Our Shame* (2013) suggests that appealing to shame may indeed have been a more effective way of motivating the white moderates than appealing to empathy. Like King, Lebron believes that shame is an appropriate and helpful moral response to racial injustice in the United States. Unlike King, Lebron argues that shame does not require a "distinct other" (or second person component): instead, it "requires a shift in our perspective such that we become our own audience" (2013, 21). For Lebron, shame occurs when we hold *ourselves* accountable to our own principles and ideals (2013, 21).

According to Lebron, shame can play an important role in "aspirational politics" (2013, 24) by bringing deliberation and action together (2013, 25), which forces critical self-

assessment followed by attempts to “set ourselves straight” in the future (2013, 23). Lebron believes that we are moved to do better because we care deeply about falling away from our own ideals, and we wish to find our way back toward them. Following Aristotle, Lebron argues that we care about our own ideals because they are essential to our own flourishing and the flourishing of others—a mutual flourishing that is crucial in a democratic society (2013, 23-24). Lebron believes that society and its institutions can be designed to foster and habituate this type of healthy, appropriate shame among democratic citizens, and he (like King) believes that propaganda has an important role to play in fostering this kind of useful shame. For example, he argues that public service announcements can be specially crafted to actively compel people to feel shame in response to racial injustice (2013, 149). In the context of American democracy, says Lebron, appeals to shame are especially useful. Shame is inherently egocentric; it is the emotion we feel when we see ourselves failing to meet *our own* commitments. Shame is a response to the perceived “bad self.”

King’s account departs from Lebron’s notion of shame as *only* focused inward on the self. King may have seen the value in appealing to whites’ self-concept as a form of self-interest by framing their failure in terms of failing *themselves*—their own flawed moral character, their inability to meet their own commitments, and their resulting diminished self-respect. However, King believed that this inward movement was not enough to accomplish his political goals. As I have already suggested, white moderates are, at least on some level, already aware of their moral failure, but this recognition only leads them to create spurious justifications to rationalize their passivity. As Lebron frames it, shame is only likely to exacerbate the tendency to rationalize by encouraging the white moderates to focus on themselves. This is something Lebron himself recognizes when he writes that shame can “prompt persons to turn away from the critical gaze” (2013, 24).

This is why King sought a synthesis between two extremes: rather than invoking only empathic imagination of and identification with Black suffering, which entails moving one’s own consciousness *outward* to inhabit another’s perspective (an other-focused act), or invoking only shame as Lebron defines it, which entails turning consciousness inward to judge one’s own behavior (a self-focused act), King’s notion of shame invoked both inward and outward

movements. King sees shame as a kind of double movement in which people first go outward *and then back inward*. People first turn to others, particularly respected moral authorities, to see what others think about the self, then turn back inward, using that information to see the self in a new way. For King, the other becomes a sort of mirror that reflects a true picture back to the self.¹¹

Given his focus on stimulating shame, both in his demonstrations and writings, King clearly believed that there was something special about shame, in this sense, that would help white moderates to overcome their tendency toward rationalization and bad faith. When we reexamine shame as a second personal attitude—as moving both outwards and inwards—we see how shame, as King understands it, can effect this result. In King’s account, shame leads us to see ourselves not merely as our own audience, as Lebron imagines, but through the eyes of other audience members whose opinions we value. By treating them as equal to ourselves, worthy of judging our performances, we recognize their moral status and authority and their claim against us. To do this is precisely to respect their inherent dignity and equal moral status, and it is this respect that undoes the ideology of white supremacy and prevents rationalization.

This is why shame pre-empts the train of rationalizations that empathy is likely to give rise to. King opens the Letter by flattering and identifying with his audience: he wouldn’t bother answering their letter, he says, but for the fact that they are “men of genuine good will” with “sincere” criticisms – not people arguing in bad faith (though that is indeed what they are doing). In starting out this way, King compels the audience to reaffirm what they say they believe – are they not in favor of justice and equality? – before establishing his own authority and enumerating their hypocrisies.

A problem with empathy, which King may have been aware of, is that it assumes a pre-existing equality. That is, if empathy is to work, the audience has to already recognize the suffering of others as relatable—to see others’ suffering as commensurate to their own. This

¹¹ According to Rogers, empathy “looks outward to others” and shame “looks inward to the self that has contributed to suffering” (2012, 200); and they work together to motivate people. I am suggesting that, as a second personal attitude, shame incorporates both elements and is, in this sense, distinct from empathy as Rogers conceives of it. I don’t take this difference to be too significant. In the end, we both think that other and self-focused attitudes are important and must often be combined for motivation to occur.

requires a belief in the other person's equality.¹² However, in the case of white supremacy, this equality does not necessarily pre-exist; it must be constructed. This is the work of shame. As the Letter makes clear, King has to establish himself as an authority; he cannot take it for granted that his audience will take his reproach seriously, as authoritative—indeed, they have already tried to dismiss him as an “outsider” without standing. Thus, equal standing is something that must be built through the interaction – through King's writing and the white moderates' reading of the Letter. When the white moderates feel shame, after reading the Letter, they will implicitly recognize the authority of King's evaluative perspective and affirm his viewpoint. Rather than assuming that it is there from the outset, the dynamics of shame get the audience to affirm what they might otherwise avoid or disavow. It is this aspect of shame that may make it particularly useful in helping the white moderates to overcome their affected ignorance and to ultimately change their behavior.

In conclusion, King's writing aims to initiate shame, acceptance of moral truth, and, ultimately, moral transformation through his notion of the “sensible sermon,” a form of worship that culminates in action. As he reminds us, “worship at its best is a social experience where men come together in a deep sense of fellowship and where they forget themselves”; in the house of worship, people “somehow forget our external attachments,” and together, they “come and bow before the Almighty God” (King 2007d, 287). The Letter hopes to simulate this same fellowship: to bring white people together with Black people, to remind white moderates of the moral community and commitments they share in with Black people and with God. King hopes that this form of shared worship, bringing together the rational and the emotional, will lead to concerted collective action to bring about a just society.

§6. Beyond a Politics of Shame?

King knew that concerted nonviolent pressure from Black Americans was necessary to push white moderates past their self-interested passivity and act to abolish racial segregation. The Letter was a piece of democratic propaganda meant to appeal to white moderates' sense

¹² Saidiya Hartmann gives a strong account of why this assumption of equality fails under white supremacy through what she calls “fungibility” (the “replaceability and interchangeability endemic to a commodity”) (1997, 21-26).

of shame. King hoped this would spur political transformation among the white moderates and foster racial progress across the United States.

King offered us an innovative account of democratic propaganda, which moved beyond empathy, instead emphasizing the second personal aspect of shame as a moral emotion. Is King's picture of political motivation – particularly its emphasis on shame –equally relevant today?

On May 25, 2020 George Floyd, a 46-year-old Black American man, was murdered by Minneapolis police during an arrest. Footage of the arrest from the *New York Times* shows Derek Chauvin, a white police officer, kneeling on Mr. Floyd's neck while he was pinned to the floor for at least 8 minutes and 15 seconds. Chauvin was initially charged with third-degree murder and second-degree manslaughter, but the third-degree murder charge was later dropped. After Mr. Floyd's death, protests calling for an end to police brutality and defunding the police took place, lasting throughout the summer in Minneapolis and other cities across the United States and around the world.

It is notable that overt appeals to shame have not played a central role in the current movement. There was one exception—the Mayor of Minneapolis was heckled by a group of mostly white protestors, who repeatedly yelled, “Shame, shame, shame,” after he ruled out defunding the police department during a political demonstration (“Shame!” 2020). Outside of this moment, students of the current movement are hard pressed to find explicit appeals to shame among protestors. There seems to be a committed rejection of the politics of shame.

The current movement is likely inspired less by the thinking of King than by that of leaders of the Black Power Movement, such as Stokely Carmichael. In Carmichael's view, King “made one fallacious assumption: In order for nonviolence to work, your opponent has to have a conscience. The United States has no conscience” (Bates 2014). A conscience is required to feel shame; if white Americans lack a conscience, then they cannot feel shame and cannot undergo the kind of moral transformation that King sought to inspire.¹³

¹³ Jill Locke (2016) raises related worries.

Initially, King believed that Carmichael's failure to see the constructive potential of shame was the result of a kind of myopia. He wrote, "whenever a man looks merely at his circumstances he ends up in despair, disillusionment and cynicism" (King 2007a, 227). While some of us may be tempted, because of our own circumstances, to look upon all white Americans as evil, King advised us to look beyond our own individual situations and look at the bigger picture. When we do not generalize, we may discover that "some of the most implacable and vehement advocates of racial equality are consecrated white persons" (King 2007a, 227). As evidence of this claim, King declared: "the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People was organized by whites, and even to this day gains a great deal of its support from northern and southern white persons" (King 2007a, 227). He also believed that the conscience of many white Americans had been aroused after the campaign in Birmingham (King 1965), saying that the summer of 1963 "awoke the consciences of millions of white Americans and caused them to examine themselves and to consider the plight of twenty million black disinherited brothers" (King 2001, 218). This awakening, he said, led white Americans to "come forth boldly to join hands" (King 2001, 226) with Black Americans, and it moved the American government "to write legislation . . . in the hope that it would eradicate the stain of Birmingham" (King 1965). He saw the presence of white people at the March on Washington as further confirmation of this great "awakening" of the American conscience (King 1965).

Despite these optimistic remarks, King remained a "realist." Even when he wrote the Letter, King already recognized that Black Americans could not reliably expect most white Americans to recognize their authority as moral claim makers or to feel shame. This is in part why King publicized the letter internationally: it allowed his message to reach a multiracial global audience. As Brandon Terry (2018) argues, King believed that internationalism of the Civil Rights Movement was especially important to eliciting shame among the white moderates. King's hope was that American white moderates would react to the moral gaze of a global audience, who watched the events of Birmingham and beyond in horror and whose opinions were viewed as more morally authoritative than those of Black Americans (Terry 2018, 302). King wrote, "Our declarations that we are making progress in race relations ring with pathetic emptiness in their [the Third World's] ears . . . As the shame of Oxford, Mississippi, and

Birmingham, Alabama flashes around the globe, the world is becoming aware of our deficiencies” (quoted in Terry 2018, 302; King 2011, 95). King thus clearly hoped that the sense of falling short in the eyes of a global audience would motivate American white moderates to take action, if the fear of falling short in Black Americans’ eyes did not.

This approach had its own limitations, of course. As Terry notes, internationalism of this sort relies on white America’s capacity to recognize the moral authority of the Third World (Terry 2018, 302), and Black Power supporters were highly skeptical. Black Power supporters argued that white supremacy was a global ideology— a point that King himself would later acknowledge in his discussions of the Vietnam War. This global ideology would provide white Americans with the rationalizations they needed to discount the moral authority of the Third World. In other words, appeals to shame, whether domestic or global, were unlikely to have a significant impact.

In time, King came to acknowledge the skepticism embodied in Carmichael’s criticism. In King’s mind, the 1964 adoption of the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act completed only the “first phase” of the freedom movement. After this, King planned to launch a second phase, which involved the struggle for “economic equality” and would ensure that everyone had a basic level of income and access to reasonable healthcare, education, and fair housing. In his work toward these ends, King found that appeals to shame (and empathy) proved less effective than they had in the past.

In 1966, just one year after the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts were passed, King made his way to Chicago. The Chicago Freedom Movement was meant to tackle the discriminatory and predatory real estate practices, such as redlining, that kept Black Americans trapped inside big-city ghettos (Bernstein 2016). “If we can break the system in Chicago, it can be broken any place in the country,” King announced at a summit of community organizations in 1965 (Bernstein 2016).

However, this second phase received little support from white moderates of the North. In the white communities in Chicago, where marches for fair housing were taking place, King’s liberal friends cried out in “horror” and “dismay,” claiming that King was creating “hostility” and “hatred,” telling him, “you are only developing a white backlash” (King 1967, 96). This backlash

did not surprise King; he believed it was the surfacing of the same old prejudices, hostilities, ambivalences, and rationalizations that had always characterized white America's attitude to racial justice (King 1967, 72). His plan to secure decent jobs, housing, and income for all Americans threatened the economic and social interests of the middle and upper-class white (and Black) Northern moderates, who reacted much as the Southerners had to abolitionist and anti-segregationist movements—with violence. Famously, during a march in Marquette Park in Chicago, King was attacked by an angry white mob (Bernstein 2016). Afterward, King reported, "I've been in many demonstrations all across the South, but I can say that I have never seen, even in Mississippi and Alabama, mobs as hostile and as hate-filled as I'm seeing in Chicago" (King 2016).

While he never gave up hope in the "best" of white America and their capacity for shame and empathy, King knew at this point that he was unlikely to rouse the moral conscience of most Northern white moderates. He, therefore, focused his efforts instead on appeals to the white moderate's sense of self-interest. As David Bernstein notes in his discussion of the Chicago Campaign, "in the months that followed, King's forces mounted an aggressive 'End Slums' initiative, sponsoring tenants' unions, organizing rent strikes, conducting workshops on nonviolence with youth gangs, and calling for the boycotting of businesses that discriminated against Blacks" (Bernstein 2016). Much like in Montgomery, the hope was that an economic boycott would make the costs of inaction higher than the costs of action, and that progress would slowly be made.

In the end, as Juliet Hooker writes, and King himself came to recognize, it is not certain whether "dominant groups can be shamed into renouncing racial power" (Hooker 2016, 458). Moreover, Hooker argues, even if shame did change white America's moral orientation in the 1960s, "shaming whites into solidarity" may be far more difficult today than it was historically (Hooker 2016, 460) —a claim borne out by the contemporary "varied response" to the Black Lives Matter movement. The fact that racial terror, mass incarceration, racial profiling, excessive force used by the police, disparities in sentencing, and a lack of accountability of law enforcement continue to exist today—half a century after the original Black civil rights movement—may indicate that we need a new approach to Black politics and activism.

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