The Review of Politics (2026), **88**, 498–502
doi:10.1017/S0034670526100977

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Problem-Space of Democratic Faith

Erin Pineda

Government, Smith College, Northampton, MA, USA
Email: epineda@smith.edu

(Received 18 June 2024 UTC; revised 18 June 2024 UTC; accepted 18 June 2024 UTC)

Keywords: African American political thought; race and politics; democracy; freedom; slavery

It is an ugly and dispiriting thing to bear witness to the full measure of horror in the United States' past and present of racial domination. A history running from genocide, colonization, and enslavement through lynch law and Jim Crow to contemporary mass incarceration and organized abandonment attests not only to the longevity of white supremacy, but its creative capacities for reorganization and institutional innovation. In view of this long national nightmare, what could sustain faith in the dream of a multiracial democracy that has not yet materialized—and may never come to be?

This is the question animating Melvin Rogers's rich and engaging study of a tradition of African American political thought he calls "black perfectionism." Spanning roughly 130 years between David Walker's 1829 *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World* and James Baldwin's 1963 exchange with Gunnar Myrdal, Sidney Hook, and Nathan Glazer, this tradition represents an engagement with "the practices and habits of domination that emerge from white supremacy's hierarchy of value" (10). This tradition draws on the normative vocabulary of American republicanism while reinventing it, staging a rupture between the present of racial hierarchy and the future of a democracy that can only be imagined and desired. What Walker and Baldwin share with Frederick Douglass, Ida Wells-Barnett, Billie Holliday, W. E. B. Du Bois, and the other thinkers assembled in the book is a "'problem-space' of language and action" (9), to borrow from David Scott: "an ensemble of questions and answers around which a horizon of identifiable stakes (conceptual as well as ideological-political stakes) hangs."[1] Their shared question is about the "soul" of the nation: the habits of acquiescence and submission on the one hand and disregard and domination on

[1] David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 2004), 4.

© The Author(s), 2026. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of University of Notre Dame.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670526100977 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the other that construct our character (individual and collective) on both sides of the color line, and that stabilize white supremacy while undermining the equality and freedom that democracy requires. What kind of intervention could transform the American character to make democracy possible, and what can sustain such action in the face of an ongoing reality that constantly confirms the magnitude—if not the impossibility—of the task?

In reconstructing a collective answer, Rogers turns to rhetoric: the aesthetic and political art of appeal and propaganda. Walker's *Appeal* provides the basis: it enacts the ideal of democratic citizenship that it simultaneously articulates, calling on citizens to exercise their capacities for judgment and resist domination and at the same time hailing a community of equal standing and ethical responsiveness. Because racial domination distorts everyone's capacities for freedom—our souls—bringing a democratic polity into being requires a new understanding of civic virtue and a corresponding program of citizen reeducation. Wells-Barnett's antilynching activism, Holliday's "Strange Fruit" and Du Bois's artful propaganda are distinct and powerful attempts to intervene on the terrain of our "cognitive-affective" capacity for self-improvement, working not just with facts and reason but on sentiment and affect—triggering horror at the spectacle of lynching, sympathy with the "spiritual strivings" of fellow citizens, and shame at our failure to live out our commitments. In prompting a crisis of identity and moral standing (the discomfort of the question, "Who am I?"), these affective interventions create the conditions for "[generating] a new way of living" by alerting us to "the demand of a democratically just society" (263).

The transformative work of rhetoric requires attending to the horrors of the past and present rather than diminishing or dismissing them. Both structurally and argumentatively, the book pivots around the dispute between Douglass and Martin Delany. Their disagreement is not over the legacies of racial tyranny but over what to do with them. While Delany "[privileges] the descriptive people" (152), rendering as static current conditions and projecting them into a future whose shape is certain, Douglass finds resources in the discursive traditions of American republicanism to call up an imaginary "people" that remains, and must remain, constitutively open. As Rogers argues, the legitimacy of US democracy is premised on such an imaginary—an aspirational vision of our own revolutionary "power for making and remaking society" (161).

Thus, like Scott, Rogers turns to narrative as a way to restage the relationship between past, present, and future in order to reveal a more complex inheritance and sustain a more open-ended relation toward what is to come. Rejecting the fixity of present-day horrors does not commit us to fantasies of inevitable progress; indeed, both resignation to the idea of a perpetually racist polity and facile hope in the powers of a Myrdallian "American Creed" share a "form of narration that already contains the closures, openings, possibilities, and even settled futures" (4). The horizons of a future multiracial democracy premised on mutuality, equality, and freedom may continue to recede; yet we must act to bring it about, lacking any assurances of success (166). Acting under these conditions—standing amid the wreckage of past and present violence, resisting the false alternatives of resignation and redemption—requires what Du Bois

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670526100977 Published online by Cambridge University Press

called "a hope not hopeless but unhopeful"[2] or what Rogers terms "democratic faith" (21).

I want to push on these resonances with Scott to ask whether Rogers succeeds in resisting the pull of transhistorical narratives and the slide into a certain kind of romanticism—not, in this case, the moral arc of inevitable redemption, but the vision of a politics of ethical appeal, freed from persuasion's messy, dark entanglements with power and coercion. In focusing on rhetoric as the mode of political intervention that enacts democratic faith, Rogers excludes those forms of political activity that may be necessary to create persuasion's conditions of possibility. While Rogers alludes—briefly—to other political methods used by these African American intellectuals in pursuit of their commitment to a democracy yet-to-come, the reader is left to imagine what these methods entailed, and perhaps to presume that none of them endangered the non-sovereign respect for another's judgment that marks Rogers's reading of discursive appeal (15)—the "aspiration to persuade from within," without recourse to coercion and without the desire to control or manipulate (216, 224). What is missing is what Scott describes as the structure of tragedy, which centers "those instances in which the plurality of values is such that it is impossible to choose satisfactorily—to choose without remainder—between rival goods"[3] and in which the action taken cannot but undermine at least one of the goods being sought.

Martin Luther King, Jr. provides an instructive example. King appears, albeit briefly, in the book's introduction and conclusion, and in some ways personifies the democratic faith Rogers theorizes. Stubbornly insistent on human potential for transformation amid the evidence of entrenched racial domination and oriented toward the horizon of a Beloved Community that he could not guarantee would arrive, King mobilized a form of "democratic propaganda" intended to elicit revulsion and shame—the feeling that we have not only "failed to live up to the vision of ourselves to which we are committed" (258), but also that we have fallen short in ways that deserve the moral reproach of those with "the authority to judge us, or make a claim upon us about the significance of our own actions."[4] Yet as a theorist of and participant in disobedient collective action, King attended to the fraught relationship between persuasion and coercion, both of which were required for democratic transformation—even as each constantly risked overwhelming or undermining the other. Persuasion alone could not overcome the conditions of misrecognition—the inability of white citizens to see black people as those with the standing to make moral claims on them—and so, on its own, could not provoke the shame that promised transformation. Coercion alone, however, would fail to respect white citizens as the kind of agents capable of ethical transformation, and in so doing might succeed only at entrenching backlash and vindicating white reaction.[5] Persuasion and coercion

[2] W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, ed. Brent Hayes Edwards (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 141.

[3] Scott, *Conscripts*, 182–83.

[4] Meena Krishnamurthy, "Martin Luther King Jr. on Democratic Propaganda, Shame, and Moral Transformation," *Political Theory* 50, no. 2 (April 2022): 318.

[5] Alexander Livingston, "'Tough Love': The Political Theology of Civil Disobedience," *Perspectives on Politics* 18, no. 3 (September 2020): 851–66.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670526100977 Published online by Cambridge University Press

needed each other; yet they stood less in balance than in tension, one always threatening to undo the logic of the other.

The fraught (indeed, tragic) nature of this dynamic within the violent horizons of the late 1960s contributed to despair at the end of King's life. Rogers defines the onset of despair narrowly as "moments when the quest to transform the United States [is] abandoned, never to be pursued again" (12); he thus aligns despair with Delany's empiricist pessimism, and so sets its experience outside the scope of democratic faith. Yet despair, as Robyn Marasco contends, signifies neither resignation nor the demise of political attachments but indexes their continued intensity. Even as despair indicates an end, it is at the same time a beginning, as our trodden paths terminate in dead ends but nevertheless slingshot us back around, running headlong into praxis.[6] King's despair marked not a turn away from commitment to transformation but revealed the exhaustion of a paradigm—the ragged and worn-out edges of a problem-space that no longer served the political desires that first animated it. For all that separated them in terms of political theory and strategy, by the end of his life King largely agreed with Kwame Turé (then Stokely Carmichael) that the political, economic, and psychic structures of US civic life made it unlikely that shame could do the work it needed to—that it could "become a revolutionary emotion."[7] Thus, in King's last years, even as his approach to mass civil disobedience held fast to a "future-oriented pursuit of new values worthy of a democratic society," he left behind an earlier orientation toward ethical transformation through shame. Instead, he took up the language of power—a logic of self-defense and nonviolent coercion forced to "negotiate the fragile and volatile reaction of white fear."[8] It was a despairing discourse, but one no less faithful to a vision of democracy yet-to-come.

For Scott, a problem-space is a "fundamentally temporal concept."[9] Problem-spaces "do not have everlasting shapes," and over time "old questions may lose their salience, their bite, and so lead the range of old answers that once attached to them to appear lifeless, quaint, not so much wrong as irrelevant."[10] I want to inquire after the historicity of the book's constitutive problem-space, to wonder about the temporality of its "logic of question-and-answer." Could there be a time after which the characterological question about a nation's soul—and the answer it elicits in the form of persuasive appeal—can no longer fuel the democratic faith it once ignited? While the book's method is historical, running from the mid-nineteenth to mid-twentieth century, its narrative frame insists that these old questions remain ours (1–5, 290). To be sure, some kind of

[6] Robyn Marasco, *Highway of Despair: Critical Theory after Hegel* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

[7] Kwamé Ture and Charles Hamilton, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation* (New York: Vintage, 1992), p. xvii.

[8] Alexander Livingston, "Power for the Powerless: Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Late Theory of Civil Disobedience," *Journal of Politics* 82, no. 2 (March 2020): 712. As Krishnamurthy likewise notes, the logic of shame appears to have receded from contemporary racial justice activism, no longer holding pride of place. Krishnamurthy, "Democratic Propaganda," 325–29.

[9] Scott, *Conscripts*, 4.

[10] Scott, *Conscripts*, 4.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670526100977 Published online by Cambridge University Press

democratic faith may well be coterminous with democracy itself; so long as we continue to remain attached to the latter, we require some version of the former to make sense of our actions amid both uncertainty and ongoing domination. Yet Scott is correct that old questions—even powerful ones that sustained a century's worth of political action, ones still worthy of intellectual excavation and elaboration—may eventually lose their hold on us. Then, it is up to us to forge a new politics (new questions; new answers) while standing in the terrible freedom of their loosened grip.

Cite this article: Erin Pineda, "The Problem-Space of Democratic Faith," *The Review of Politics* (2026), **88**, 498–502. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670526100977

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670526100977 Published online by Cambridge University Press