

ROBERT PENN WARREN JAMES BALDWIN TAPE #1 APRIL 27

Mr. WARREN: This is the first tape of a conversation with James Baldwin, April 27. In what sense, Mr. Baldwin, do you think the revolution is a revolution. How would you (cough) previous concepts of revolutions?

Mr. BALDWIN: Well, that's a tough one to answer. I'm not always sure that the word revolution is the right word. I myself use it, but I don't know of any other. It's not, in my mind anyway, like - it's not a symbol of one class against another, for example. It is not as clearcut, let us say, as the Algerian revolution against the French. It is a very peculiar revolution because it has to, in order to succeed at all, it has to have as its aim the reestablishment of a union, and a great - a radical shift in the American mores, the American way of life, you see, not only as it applies to the Negro obviously, but as it applies to every citizen of the country. This is - it's a very tall order, and desperately dangerous but inevitable in my view, because of the nature of our history, of the nature of the American Negro's relationship to the rest of the country, of all these generations, and the attitudes taught him, which is simply now - always was, but now has become overtly and concretely intolerable.

RPW: May I interrupt here for one moment. You say, different from a revolution like the Algerian, which means the liquidation of a class, of another country's control - more of a regime. And also it is not the liquidation of a class either - something else is involved.

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JB: No, because the Algerians and the French have very great differences - partly simply because the Algerians have a country called Algeria which happens to be ruled by France, and the aim of the revolution there would have had to be to break the power of the French.

RPW: An old type of nationalistic revolution, then, is that it?

JB: Yes, that's right. It doesn't apply here at all, because this is, at least in principle, one nation - it's Americans battling to get rid of an invader or to - even to destroy a class, but to liberate themselves and their children from - from what, precisely? From the economic and social sanctions imposed on them traditionally because they were slaves here. Now, there are some concrete things involved in this, I think. I think that, for example, if Washington had the energy to move, to break the power of people like Senator Eastland and Russell so the Negroes began to vote in the South, you would have made a large step forward. If Negroes could vote in this city you would have a different state. If we get a different state in Mississippi you would begin to have a different country. I mean, it's not as mystical or as fuzzy as you make it seem. It seems to me that the South is ruled, very largely so, by an oligarchy which rules for its own benefit, and not only oppresses Negroes and murders them, but really imprisons and victimizes the bulk of the white population.

RPW: You said once in print that the Southern mob does not represent the will of the Southern majority.

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JB: I still feel that. I think that the -

RPW: How would you discuss that?

JB: Well, those mobs that fill the street, it seems to me - unless one is prepared to say that the South is populated entirely by monsters, which I am not - those mobsters fill the street on reflection of the terror they all - everybody feels. This is on the lowest level. And those mobsters fill the street and then are used by the American economy for generations to keep the Negro in his place. In fact, they have done the - the Americans North and South by the way - dirty work for him. They have always been encouraged to do it. No one has ever even given them any hint that it was wrong, and of course they are now completely bewildered and -

RPW: The mob.

JB: The mob, yes. And they only react in one way, which is survival, in the same way that the Alabama sheriff, facing a Negro student, knows he's in danger, knows what the danger is, and all he can do is beat him over the head or counterpart him. He doesn't know what else to do.

RPW: May I interrupt to make one test here, to make sure we have - (test of tape). All revolutions of the ordinary historical type have depended on, say, the driving force of hope and the driving force of hate. They're going somewhere and they are mobilizing their adrenalin against something, I suppose we could put it this way. There are other things that may be involved, but those things - . Now, would this be directed against a regime to be liquidated, it's one thing.

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When it's inside of a system which must be reordered but not destroyed
- reorganized - then the hope-hate ratio might change.
I am thinking of how the hate is to be accommodated in a case like
that - this kind of a quotes - revolution.

JB: Well, the American Negro has had to accommodate a vast amount
of hatred for - ever since he's been here, and that was a terrible
school to go through. I think, though, that so far and in this con-
text, operates to control what hatred - such hatred as there is. I
don't - I myself - I am accused of hating all white people and saying
that all Negroes do - I myself don't feel that so much as I feel the
bitterness and disappointment. One has been too involved to hate any-
body whom he raised. You can despise him - you know, you can - you
have a great complex of feelings about them and you may even give
moments when you could kill them. But it wouldn't come under the
heading for me of the hatred the Algerians felt for the French,
which is obviously on one level certainly much less complicated.
The Frenchman is simply a Frenchman. But here it's your brothers
and your sisters, whether or not they know it, they are your brothers
and your sisters. And that complicates it. It complicates it so
much that I can't possibly myself quite see my way through this. As
for the hope, that is fuzzy too. Hope for what? You know, the best
people along this revolution certainly don't hope to become what the
bulk of Americans have become. So the hope begins then to ask me to
create a new nation under intolerable circumstances and with very
little time and against the resistance of most of the country.

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RFW: You mean the hope is not simply to move into white middle class values, is that it?

JB: Well, even if that were the hope, as a matter of fact, but even if that were the hope, it would not be possible. It is simply not possible for the church, for example, to accept me into it without becoming a different institution and I would be deluded not to realize that. And the church of course realizes it, which is why - you know, why it isn't about to change. What applies to the church applies to politics, applies to every level of national life. In order to accommodate me, in order to overcome so many centuries of cruelty and bad faith and genocide and fear - simple fear - all the American institutions and all the American values, public and private, will have to change. The Democratic Party will have to become a different party, for example.

RFW: How do you envisage the result of this movement if successful? What kind of a world do you envisage out of it?

JB: Well, I envisage a world which is almost impossible to imagine in the country. Still, the world in which ultimately race would count for nothing, in which Americans simply - not so simply - would grow up enough to recognize that I don't frighten them. A lot of the problem here is not - has nothing to do with the race at all. It has to do with ignorance and it has to do with the cult of youth.

RFW: Undoubtedly that's true. May we hold that, though, for a moment. It's one of the points where other things intercept this. Some people say, like Oscar Handlin and other historians and sociolo-

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gists, that equality increases rather than diminishes the tendency of ethnic groups to pull together, to find themselves as a group, that once the pressure of discrimination has been lessened or removed, has been for the ethnic group to coalesce rather than to dissolve.

JB: I'm not sure I agree with that, and in any case I'm very badly placed to answer it since the American Negro is not that particular transformation, you know, and as the ethnic group in this context can only really refer to the American Negro.

RPW: In this particular case we're talking about.

JB: It can't really apply to the Irish and not really, finally, to the Jew. It - we're talking about the low man on the American totem pole, the man on whose labor this country - whose free labor this country was built.

RPW: What about this, though, in that connection, as a question to speculate about for a moment. In the last few years, if we can believe the sales of bleaching creams and such things, and the avowed sentiments of many Negroes, there is a movement toward an acceptance of and a pride in Negro identity as opposed to an older tendency to shift from that center, that is the actual passing of that changing personality or appearance. This would seem to indicate something wouldn't it?

JB: What I think it indicates is simply that for the first time in American Negro history or in American history, the American black man

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is not at the mercy of the American white man's image of him. This is because of Africa because he has not been reached.

RPW: It's true he has not been reached, but the question of a tendency or a will is more defined.

JB: I really think it comes out of the fact that for the first time in the memory of anybody living African states mean Africa. The West was forced to deal with Africans on the level of power, and the image of, you know, the shiftless darkie and all that jazz which has lived so long was shattered and kids then - people - had another image to turn to which released them. It's still, by the way, you know, after all, very romantic for an American Negro to think of himself as an African, but it's a necessary step in the re-creation of his morale.

RPW: In the matter of - discussed long ago by duBoise and many other people since, of the possible split in the psyche of the American Negro - and you have written something about this, along this line - the tendency to identify with the African culture or African mystique or the mystique noire or to other - even the American Negro culture as opposed to American white culture - the tendency to pull in that direction - as opposed to the tendency to pull over and accept the Western European American white tradition, as another pull - are these things against each other or can be anyway - for some people they are - some people profess to be greatly troubled by this - do you feel this question is real - for yourself or your observation?

JB: Well - answer that - in my own case, for whatever that means - it was very hard for me to accept Western European values

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because they didn't accept me. It was - any Negro born in this country spends a great deal of time trying to be accepted, trying to find a way to operate within the culture and to - not to be made to suffer so much by it but nothing you do works. No matter how many showers you take, no matter what you do, these Western values simply - absolutely resist and reject you. So that inevitably at some point you turn away from them or you re-examine them. I think first you turn away, then perhaps you re-examine them. Because there's something that slaves in you and the masters haven't found it out yet but the slaves who, you know, who adopted the bloody cross, did know one thing, they knew the masters could not - these masters could not be Christians because Christians couldn't have treated them that way. You know what I mean - this rejection has been at the very heart of the American Negro psyche from the beginning.

RPW: Let's take the African side of it. You have written on that along the way, by covering that conference in the past - the piece about that - that would imply a difficulty - what you have written there would imply a difficulty too in identifying with

JB: If one is going to be honest about that, it's almost - it's not impossible but at that point certainly in my life and - I mean, I think for many people and until now, it's hard because it's all been buried, it's hard, for that matter, for Africans who only now are beginning to - well - The Long Colonial Night - so there's a sense in which you can say that Africa - the very word African - the very term is a European invention. I'm not at all

convinced that people in villages outside of the cities feel themselves as Africans, you know - and after all, it wasn't very long ago the Italians didn't think of themselves as Italians.

RPW: It's not their horizon - the African village is not the horizon.

JB: Not yet, no. I should think it would take, I don't know, a couple of generations. And in the case of an American Negro, Africa, - you know, which part of Africa? Which Africa would you be thinking of? Are you thinking of Senegali, are you thinking of St. Louis, are you thinking of the middle - of Freetown? And if you are thinking of any of these places, what do you know about them? And what is there that you can use? What is there that you can contribute to? These are very great impressions. I don't think that there is - that the word is absolute, that no bridge can be made, but I think it's - we've been away from Africa for four hundred years and no power in the heavens would allow me to find my way back. I can go back, and maybe even function there, but it would have to be on terms which have yet to be worked out.

RPW: Richard Wright didn't find it very happy, did he?

JB: No, not at all. Not at all. I think Richard went there with the wrong assumptions, but then there's no way not to go there with the wrong sort of assumptions. I did too, in a way, you know - not Richard's assumptions, but - I don't know - I just didn't know what I would find, and what I found surprised me and I must say sort of gladdened me, but I still would not be able to say exactly what it

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was, and I still less would be able to tell you what my own relationship to it is.

RFW: Do you remember what your assumptions were?

JB: No, I guess I blocked them out. I remember before I went I did my best to discard whatever assumptions I might have had - but of course you never succeed in doing that, you know. I did realize, but I realized it before, you know, that I was - in some ways very European because that was the way I had been - that's what I had been stained by, you know, and that there were - and also that I was a Puritan in the sense that - a very serious sense and in the sense that Africans are not - in the sense that - to being distrustful of the flesh and the celebration and of being afflicted with its only Western kind of self consciousness which I will always have. I realized, too, that the reality of castration had been uppermost in my mind, as it has been in the minds of almost any American Negro male - since you realized - from the time I realized I was a male. And this has done something to my psyche, no matter how I adjusted myself to it or failed to adjust myself to it, it had been a reality for me in a way that had not been, so far as I could tell, for them. There were a great many differences - but there were also great echoes which were more troubling and I didn't - because I couldn't - I found those harder to read.

RFW: Do you think the echoes came from actual cultural transmission or in some other way - or do you know?

JB: That is a blank -

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RPW: Or does anyone know?

JB: I just don't - couldn't answer that. I saw girls on the streets of Freetown with groceries on their heads and their babies on their backs who looked just like - more like girls on Lenox Avenue. I'm not capable of telling you what this means, but maybe I'll find out one day. I'm going back.

RPW: I've heard young - youngish Negroes in the North who have gone to Mississippi or Alabama to work on voter registrations or such things, say that the salvation is in meeting the purity of expression, the purity of feeling in some poor half literate or cotton picker, you see, who has come awake to his manhood.

JB: I would tend to agree with that.

RPW: This is the force of the real revelation.

JB: I think - I would really agree with that. I've seen in my own - you know, myself, some extraordinary people coming, just - coming out of some enormous darkness and there's something indescribably moving and direct and heroic about those people. And that's where the hope in my mind lies, much more than in, let's say, someone like me, who's, you know, much more corrupted by the psychotic society in which we live.

RPW: This impulse that you have and those people I was speaking of have, is a very common one in many different circumstances, though, isn't it?

JB: Yes, I know.

RPW: You will find many white people - I use the word "romanticize"

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now without prejudice -

JB: I know what you mean.

RPW: - about some simpler form of life - the white hunter is - and in the Far West, or the Indian, or even turns toward the Negro in that same romantic way.

JB: Um-hm - or the worker.

RPW: Or the worker. This is an impulse which many people feel inner complications or live in a complicated world which they don't quite accept or won't accept, turn to some simpler form.

JB: I'm not sure it's simpler, though. That's my real reservation about it. I'm not convinced that some of those old ladies that I talked to down there - I know they aren't simple - they're far from simple - and what the emotional psychological make-up is which allows them to endure so long is something of a mystery to me. They are no more simple, for example, than Medgar Evers was simple - you know, he was -

RPW: He was apparently - certainly a different cut from, you know, the -

JB: You know, there's something very rustic about him and direct, but obviously he was far from simple man. I think that it has something to do with, you know, what one takes - I don't know, you know - it has something to do with what one thinks the nature of reality is. And especially in this country now, it's very hard to read the riddle of the human personality because we've had so little respect for it. I think this complicates all our endeavors and all our re-

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relationships. I don't - my own father, who was certainly something like those people - was very far from being a simple man. It was simply I think that the nature of his complexity and the nature of the complexity of those field workers in the Deep South

RPW: recalled or thought of as - more as corresponding white types.

JB: Yes, you might. Now, here I'm on very shaky ground. I don't - I'm not equipped to say yes or no. But I was -

RPW: The son of a Southern sharecropper - a white sharecropper.

JB: Except that I have the feeling that the difference between the Southern white sharecropper and a black one - speaking in terms of - now speaking - this is a generality obviously - so I suspect that the difference is in the nature of the relationship to their own pain. I think the white Southern sharecropper in a general way would have a much harder time using his pain, using his sorrow, putting himself in touch with it, and using it to survive, than a black one. And his melancholy and even tragic in Negro experience which is simply denied in white experience. I think this makes a very great difference - a difference in authority, a difference in growth, a difference in possibility. One thing that is not true of the Negro in this context anyway, is he is not forbidden as all white Southerners are to assess his own beginnings. He may find out well he's no longer impossible or dangerous or fatal to do so. But a white Southerner I think suffers from the fact that his childhood, his early youth, you know - when his relationships to the black people is very different

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than it becomes later - is sealed off from him, and he can never dig it up on pain of destruction, nearly, and this creates his torment and his paralysis.

RPW: Do you see any chance of an understanding between, say, the Southern poor white and the poor Southern Negro?

JB: nothing to create that and nothing to defeat that. That is, the bargain struck by the Reconstruction I suppose, you know, which was - use the poor white I don't know enough about that era, you know, to discuss it in any detail, but I know to what you are referring. But my point in any case is that they didn't. And now the situation is more grim than ever. It would seem to me, to go back to what I said earlier, that the - part of the answer to that problem, that question, would really be to begin to break the power of a few men in the Democratic Party.

RPW: Some Negroes in Mississippi and Alabama hold out hope for this, for the understanding, for the rapprochement between the Southern poor white, the sharecropper type, the laborer, and the poor Negro.

JB: Well, I don't see much hope for this the way things are now. In the first place, the labor situation is too complex and too shaky. The white - all workers in this country are in terrible trouble.

RPW: Not enough jobs to go around.

JB: Not enough jobs - that's right - and they're all vanishing, such jobs as there are, and this does not make for good relations between workers, as we all know. I really - I still insist on, though, the fact that it really seems to me that if Mississippi could

be released from some of Eastland's great clutches, then there might be much more for the poor white who in effect is kept in prison by men like him.

RFW: Let's switch for a moment to a matter of the general pattern of leadership in the Negro revolution or whatever we settle on - almost always - I suppose always in successful movements - mass movements - in history - you find a tendency toward greater and greater centralization of leadership - the final - the man - behind him, but The Man. Is there any tendency in that direction now among Negroes, do you think? Do you see a centralization - the process going on?

JB: No. I see a shaking down or something but I don't see anything yet resembling what we can call a centralization, not according to me. A part of the problem is that the tactics of the old leadership have had to rely very heavily, you know, on the - have been defined very heavily by the white power structure. To put it another way, the college president of, let's say, forty years ago had to deal with the state governor and with the powers that be in a very different way than now, because the state is no longer able to do what it was able - since the Supreme Court decision - let me put it this way - the college president does not have to go to the state to get a college dormitory because the state is building college dormitories as fast as they can to keep Negroes out of white schools. Now, that changes - that alone changes, you know, the tactics, and changes the whole picture. Furthermore, there have always been in this country

two Negro leaders. One was - one you called the leader and one was mine, you know, the real one who was always

RPW: Well, we have - that's true, but taking things as they are now - may I try to reinterpret what you said, and if I'm wrong stop me and correct me - the NAACP legal techniques defined by the old system -

JB: Yes, to a very large extent they had to be.

RPW: Yes. Well, as legal - they were establishing as a legal reference, wouldn't they have had to work in terms of law?

JB: Well, there's a limit even to that, you see, because some of the laws with which you had to work were unjust and unworkable.

RPW: But their effort was to change this, wasn't it?

JB: I know, but the point is, indeed - and it's a very admirable effort, I'm not in any sense trying to condemn that - but it still was very complex and his enemy there was time, you know. Time does pass and a man has only one life to live. And it was inevitable that these techniques if they were not, you know, swiftly successful, and they couldn't be, would have to fail before the, you know - before the weight of human impatience which no one after all - no one can possibly condemn. And what has happened now, it seems to me, is that for the first time in the history of this struggle the poor Negro has hit the streets, really, and has changed the nature of the struggle completely and, according to me, forever. It's created new problems and it's created a new leadership too.

RPW: It's created, too, hasn't it, a struggle for power, hasn't it?

JB: Inevitably, but -

RPW: It's human.

JB: Yes. It's created a tremendous struggle for power but that's not yet such a menace as a split in the leader-- as a real split in the leadership which is, you know - which is now an open secret. There are - the people have hit the streets and the young people, you know, are not necessarily dedicated to the principles of Martin Luther King. Still less to the principles of Roy Wilkins.

RPW: What about Whitney Young's remark in the press the other day that the press had some responsibility in building up people as leaders who were designated leaders and who, by offering some dramatic resolution, claimed power. He was presumably referring to the stall-ins.

JB: Well, it's very hard to know what he's referring to, really, but I don't think it's fair to blame it on the press. I think this is irrelevant because we know what kind of press we're dealing with. I think that it's unrealistic to - as a matter of fact, you know, I'm not at all sure, but I think the stall-in was a good idea, but the dramatization of the American Negro situation is a good idea. My idea in that context was not to have a stall-in but simply to get, you know - have demonstrations in the Fair and have the people have the world in as a witness. Now, this can also be condemned as incendiary and irresponsible. But the point is that it has got to be uncovered, and among all the ways in which it's got to be uncovered one's got to face, this is going to be as wise as one might like or as responsible, and some of them are going to be by definition - have

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to be dangerous.

RPW: Let's assume that. But dangerous and to whom, and -

JB: Dangerous to us all.

RPW: To us all. In considering the matter of the overreaching of power, the bigger promise, the bigger promise, the bigger threat, the bigger threat the power - this undermines, perhaps, the responsibilities of leadership - I'm offering this as a question, not an assertion.

JB: I think the problem of leadership is extremely hard. I must - and I'm not in the position of a leader. I know it's vastly increased James Farmer's problems, whose -

RPW: Just a moment - I want to change the tape. This is the end of Tape #1, conversation with James Baldwin. Continue on Tape #2.

(end of tape)