

ROBERT PENN WARREN - DR. KENNETH CLARK Tape 1 April 7, 1964

Warren: Fresh tape, new tape. This is a conversation with Dr. Kenneth Clark, the psychologist, in New York City, April 7th. Just to plunge in, Dr. Clark, let me read what supposedly is a quote from Mr. Galamison on the school problem in New York. "I would rather see it, the public school system, destroyed" than not conform to his time table, and added - "maybe it has run its course already, the public school system."

Clark: You would want me to comment on that?

Warren: Yes, yes. That's out of context you see.

Clark: Yes. Well, the first comment I would make obviously, is that this is an unfortunate statement, and I have the feeling that if Mr. Galamison was given the opportunity to retract it, he would. Obviously, no one would benefit from the destruction of the public school system in New York City, or anywhere else in the country, for that matter, and certainly Negroes could not possibly benefit from the destruction of the public school system. My feeling is that this was one of those impulsive statements which men often make in the heat of battle, and it should not be taken seriously - and I am convinced that Mr. Galamison would not take that statement seriously now. In fact, if he were given an opportunity, I think he would take it back.

Warren: It corresponds, I suppose, to one pole of feeling, or

one aspect of feeling that's bound to be - to arise in such matters - Samson in the temple psychology.

Clark: Yes, except that I don't take that kind of statement seriously. It's obviously not a statement on which one could base a reasonable plan of action, or a program for social change. As I understand what the Negro is doing in America today, he is not asking for institutions to be destroyed. He's asking that these institutions be strengthened by including him within them, and I think we have to make a distinction between emotional statements, and sometimes hysterical slogans which people will use in the heat of battle, and sound judgments, which are the basis for the long-term program.

Warren: May I test this now to see how this is coming on? There's a problem, isn't there, in every mass movement, or even things more modest than mass movements, how you relate the emotional drives to a reasoned program. Isn't ^{it} always a problem in all movements?

Clark: Yes, and particularly when one has to face the fact that our society does not move initially on the basis of rational, factual, or ethical appeals. It is one of the most disturbing things to me to observe that emotional, irrational appeals are much more likely to be effective in bringing about initial concern with an obvious social problem, you see. For example, and

you mentioned Reverend Galamison - well, a number of people have been working on the New York City public school problem for years - for the past twenty-five years. There's been a City-wide committee on Harlem schools, that was in existence when I was in college, headed by Algernon Black. During the past ten years a number of us from the Urban League and from other citizens' groups in New York have been collecting data and trying to present to the Board of Education a sound, factual basis for increasing the efficiency of the schools in Harlem, and in other disadvantaged areas of the City. Well, actually nothing happened. I mean our reports were accepted graciously, and in effect filed and forgotten. We set up a series of conversations with the Superintendent of Schools, the Board of Education members, but the bureaucracy ignored a factual, rational approach to the diagnosis of the problem and to the attempts at effective remedy. Well, Mr. Galamison comes into the picture, and he moves on a level of emotional impact, you know. He organizes people to boycott the schools - to make immediate demands, you see, or demands for immediate change. Well, it's an important reality that one must face the fact that Mr. Galamison has had more impact within the past six months on the Board of Education of the City of New York than all of the previous years of patient, you know, reasoned, objective, factual study of this situation.

Warren: Let's make a shift to another aspect of that same problem. Clearly he's made the impact, and clearly this has been a dramatization of an intolerable situation, let's put it that way. What about rational and irrational solutions, however?

Clark: Well, that's another problem. I don't think there is any such thing as a meaningful irrational solution to the problem, but what I'm trying -

Warren: Not solution, but what passes as a solution.

Clark: No, I think that effective solutions have to be based upon facts - have to be based upon reason - have to be based upon logic, logistics, and things of that sort, but I don't think - and in looking at this society from the perspective of a Negro and a psychologist, the thing that really appalls me about this society is that one does not get to the point of even seeking the rational solutions for long-standing social ills, and maybe I should be even more specific - racial injustices, unless these injustices are dramatized for the public, more often than not, by irrational or non-rational methods and techniques. Now, the danger, of course, is the possibility of confusing the methods and techniques that are appropriate and effective for dramatizing the ills with methods and techniques that are necessary for the long-term planning and resolution of the problem.

I think one of the difficulties with the Civil Rights struggle today is that such confusion occurs in certain communities. I think we are in a danger of having that kind of confusion here in New York City.

Warren: You mean on both sides of the fence?

Clark: Right. Yes, I think that the Negro people understandably can believe that dramatic methods of protest, because they are effective in bringing into the consciousness of the people the nature of the problem, that these same methods will be effective in resolving the problem. Excuse me.

Warren: In that connection, what do you think of the bussing proposals - the particular proposals, and the possibility of other more rational ones, if you don't approve of these?

Clark: Well, there are two forms of bussing proposals - the one that is in operation now, where Negro youngsters and Puerto Rican youngsters from ghetto areas of the City are transported to receiving schools in middle-class white areas. This is the open enrollment plan. It's interesting that in the initial stages of this plan, when it was first proposed and tried out, there was opposition, a tremendous amount of opposition in certain areas of the City - In Queens, for example.

Warren: Serious opposition?

Clark: Serious opposition.

Warren: K knew there was some. I didn't know how much.

Clark: Yes, there was serious - as in Glendale - Glendale, Queens, there was organized, prolonged opposition to bringing in of Negro children into "the white schools." The Board of Education persisted, however, and continued the open enrollment program, so that there is no problem now on that. The present proposal, which is the basis of controversy and difficulty, suggested not by the Board, but by some of the Civil Rights groups, is that white children be transported into the ghetto schools. My own reaction to this is that this is unrealistic, is not likely to be implemented and is likely just to be a bone of meaningless controversy, you see. I think it is unrealistic because I am convinced that the bulk of white parents of children in the public schools would not permit their children to be transported into ghetto areas in New York for purposes of integration, or, for that matter, any purpose. I think their reasoning has some basis in fact. The schools in the Negro communities are woefully inferior. They are so inferior that no child should be required to attend them. The Negro parent, the working-class Negro parent, unfortunately has no choice, you see, except to send his child to these schools and I think this is criminal. The white parent does have a choice. If the Board of Education were to force white parents

to make this move, the middle-class white parents would escape, either by accelerating the flight to the suburbs, or by sending their children to private schools or to parochial schools.

Rather than facilitating integration, I think that type of program at this time, and at this level of development of race relations and racial attitudes in Americans, would accelerate the segregation problem. It would make the public schools almost totally a minority group - and the poor whites.

Warren: It would accentuate the class split too, wouldn't it, as well as the racial split, is that true?

Clark: I'm convinced of that. Yes, that it would - that the public schools would become exclusively, predominantly, if not exclusively, the minority group and lower class white.

Warren: Is this true - I understand from various sources, that more and more middle-class Negroes are sending their children to private schools, too.

Clark: That's quite true.

Warren: This is - this split is going on very rapidly.

Clark: Yes, one of the ironic things about the leadership of the present public school fight in New York is that the top leaders of the fight - Reverend Galamison and some of his top associates, have their own children in private schools.

Warren: So I understand.

Clark: But I would consider this as much a compliment to them, as a criticism, because what in effect that they are saying is that they are really fighting for the adequate and appropriate education, the democratic education of all children and not just their own. But it is a fact that they, recognizing the inferiority of the schools which their children would be required to attend, are willing to make whatever sacrifices are necessary to send their own children to private schools.

Warren: That argument would cut both ways, wouldn't it? A white father or mother, objecting to having a child sent to a Harlem school would be using the same argument to himself that Reverend Galemison would be using.

Clark: Exactly, exactly. And there would be no more basis on the face of it to accuse the white parent of racial prejudice, than to accuse Reverend Galemison of racial prejudice.

Warren: Or of snobbery.

Clark: Or of snobbery. It could be for the white as much a reaction to the inferiority of the school, as it is for the middle-class Negro, who refuses to send his children to existing public schools.

Warren: That point is not often recognized, however, is it?

Clark: But, it's no less real.

Warren: It's no less real. I'm talking now about the way

emotions operate, not about the way that reason operates.

Clark: Very true.

Warren: May I switch the topic a little bit. Years ago I read, began to read DuBoise, and I was struck at the time by his stating and coming over and over again to the topic of the split in the Negro psyche - this - or what he calls that split - the drive toward the mystique noir, toward the African heritage, toward the sense of a Negro culture here, as well as elsewhere, as from Africa. This sense of identity and commitment of a Negro culture, as one pull, one pole of experience, and one desire for development. The other - the exact opposite - the moving into the Western European, American-Judaic-Christian tradition, and absorbing and being absorbed into that as fully as possible, even with the possible consequence of the loss of - this is extrapolating from him - of loss of his sense of racial identity at all - and so blood absorption. These are two separate impulses. Does this strike you as a psychologist as a real problem or not?

Clark: It certainly strikes me as another bit of evidence of Dr. DuBoise's shrewdness and his ability to anticipate and to see beneath the surface problems to the basic problems of race in America. As a psychologist, I'm convinced that DuBoise was correct. The Negro in America is ambivalent in his feelings about his place in the larger society, and his feelings about

himself. It would be - it would have been a miracle if he could have adapted to the whole history of cruelty and oppression and come out of this with a positive, unalloyed, positive image of self, or a set of feelings about the society which has oppressed him in the context of a democratic ideology. The present form of this, and of course, one of the things we ought to recognize right away is that DuBoise was one of the first Americans - Negro or white, to recognize the importance of Africa, you see. DuBoise was talking about Pan-Africanism and the fact that Africa was going to be the significant area of the world in the latter part of the twentieth century, as early as the beginning of the twentieth century. He was saying this when other people barely knew what Africa was or, you know, when the average, even the average intelligent American's image of Africa was largely that of a bunch of savages and cannibals. DuBoise -

Warren: So was that of most Negroes at this time. A place to send missionaries.

Clark: That's right. That's right - was their concept of Africa. But as early as the first and second decade of the twentieth century, DuBoise was pointing to Africa as significant area of world concern.

Warren: Do you see any continuity, cultural continuity of the American Negro with Africa?

Clark: Personally? Do I, personally?

Warren: Yes, do you see any - observe any?

Clark: Well, personally, I don't. Personally, I think of Africa pretty much the way I think of Asia, or Europe, or South America. In terms of any conscious or cultural continuity between the American Negro and Africa, I think one has to be - to be realistic, one has to recognize that American slave trade systematically sought to destroy any such continuity. The Africans were not permitted to be brought - well, they were not brought here and given the opportunity to continue any of their prior heritage.

Warren: There was no cultural entity called Africa anyway, was there? It was a mass of different cultures.

Clark: A mass of different cultures - from what I have read about the slave trade - the slave traders were not anthropologists. They didn't go over there trying to bring people from the same cultural unit into the Afri - into the American scene.

Warren: Have you read a book by Stanley Elkins called Slavery, published by Chicago a few years ago.

Clark: No, I haven't.

Warren: It deals with the psychological effects on the slave in America, as compared to the psychological effects on the slave in other slave societies, like Brazil, or Cuba, or such places.

Clark: I would suspect that maybe he would conclude that slaves in America were subjected to more intense and effective degree of de-culturation than the slaves in Brazil.

Warren: Right - also the creation of the "Sambo" was worked out with the paternalistic treatment, rather than where there's totally one - the owner controlled all - with the State behind him, opposed to Central America, or South America, or a system where there is a Catholic culture, where the priest could demand the sacrament of marriage - would tend to maintain the family - where there's a State overseer who might be against, in theory anyway, the owner. And, the question of slave revolt then comes up. Why are they all so common in Catholic countries and so rare, despite Mr. Aptika, in America -

Clark: In America. Could it be also population difficulties, or differences, that - in the West Indies, certainly, the form of colonialization was such that the population - the white population was never that much greater than the slave population. And, with absentee ownership, which characterized the West Indian slave-ocracy, and to a lesser extent, the South American, this was the opposite in America, where you always had the whites in majority. And just the risk involved in revolt would be greater in a situation where there was a stable majority white population, in contrast to an economy where you had a relatively

unstable, absentee ownership and minority white population.

Warren: That would seem to be a factor in any case. Though he centers most of his discussion on the matter of the psychological effect that the system of the United States -

Clark: I think part of that psychology involves the realities of numbers.

Warren: Reality of numbers and the question of getting, by - as a corollary - a Negro community, or rebuilding one in the new context. But this bears on the question, doesn't it, of achievement of the Negro in this generation, and in some time before in achieving an identity. This is a question - not a statement - if, but if you take Elkins' theory - the problem of achieving an adequate self-image, a satisfactory identity would be stronger, greater in America, despite certain superficial benefits that the Negro has had here - than it would be in other societies.

Clark: The problem of establishing -

Warren: Would be still more difficult in America.

Clark: Establishing a positive identity, yes.

Warren: Yes.

Clark: Yes, except that one can establish an identity through protest. One -

Warren: Now - now.

Clark: Now, and I think - one looks at the Negro spirituals one sees, or at least I think one can interpret the spirituals as attempts and struggles towards some kind of positive identity through protest, through hope, through a plaintive, anguished desire for a better lot. I mean, I can't buy totally, the feeling that oppression destroys the identity surge of human beings. I think, for example, if one looks at the Jews, who have gone through much longer periods of oppression, cruelty and barbarity, you sometimes get the feeling that the Jewish identity has as its nucleus, around which everything else clusters, the protest against oppression, you see - that the Jew sees himself as someone who exists because he has been oppressed.

Warren: He also had, of a differing degree anyway, a sense of a cultural continuity, and knowledge of his history.

Clark: Sure, true. Well, a knowledge of his history, with a knowledge of the series of oppressions, the series of difficulties that he has had with -

Warren: Also the triumphs he has had.

Clark: Triumphs - but I think the triumphs were always earlier.

Warren: Earlier, but they were there.

Clark: They were there as maybe the rock on which, then, the defeats and the oppressions could rest and be brought into a more positive kind of construct.

Warren: This brings us to Malcolm X then, doesn't it?

Clark: How?

Warren: In creation of the past. Assuming his to be spurious, as opposed to what might be the real past.

Clark: Well - I don't know what is the real past for the American Negro. I think that Malcolm X is an example, or - Black Nationalism of which he is merely one form - is an example of the struggle to create a past, you know. I think that, for example, when the Muslims call themselves true Muslims because this was the heritage of their forefathers, - I'm not sure how much reality they have here. I mean, I think this is real in the sense of a wish - real in the sense of a satisfying sort of fantasy.

Warren: Hell, that was the old - any historical record would indicate that. Mohammedism came very little into Africa.

Clark: All right. If one were to be bluntly realistic and logical about this, it would seem to me that the Negro - the American Negro's past functionally begins with the slave trade, you see. This is the only verifiable continuity that he has. Obviously he has something before that, but in terms of the meaning of his present experience and existence, is to be understood in terms of the seventeenth century events - catastrophic events, I mean, disruption of whatever he had in Africa, did not carry over here. He was uprooted. He was literally

snatched away from whatever past he had, and had to begin anew here.

Warren: Now, psychologically what weight do you put on this fact - say, on the Negro situation, as opposed to that of say, the Jew, or the Nisei, or any other minority group which brings to America a form tradition and has a "glorious past" it knows about, you see.

Clark: Well, obviously, that type of advantage provides some stability - stability of self, stability of the group. It provides a rallying point for the individuals who comprise the group. The Negroes' rallying point has had to be shared oppression, you see. He has had to build a sense of group, a sense of belongingness out of the common experience, and the common experience in terms of this new culture. Mainly, he was oppressed of this new culture, he had a humanity, he had the human reactions against oppression, and he had the human desire to become free of the oppression and he has translated his desire to be free of oppression as also meaning to be incorporated into this system, without regard to his color, because he sees himself as an integral part of this society. He helped to build it. He has contributed as much as any other group, who have comprised America, and more than most.

Warren: Excuse me. This is the end of Tape 1, conversation with Dr. Kenneth Clark. Proceed on Tape 2