

CONVERSATION WITH MR. JAMES FARMER

A. You said you had carried certain white workers to the Plaquemines office, in the hope of modifying the blanket anti-white sentiment there.

Yes, it appeared to succeed, at least in part, I don't know how deep the success was, but these individual white persons were finally accepted by the Negro community -- they were accepted as individuals -- and in a sense, removed from the white race and accepted into the Negro race. They were considered exceptions -- as in case of one young lady who was working for CORE down there, it become really a part of the Negro community; I visited later and was talking with some of the Negroes and they said "Well, yes, she is white but she is the blackest white woman we have ever seen" -- so I am not sure if there is a carry-over from their response to these individuals.

A. You mean the real carry-over -- if I am interpreting you right -- would be to say "Not the blackest white woman" but a human being.

A human being, yes, exactly. I suspect that we are in for not only a long, hot summer, but to use that now cliché, but for a long dark night of polarization between the races. I think it is a temporary thing and we will get over it, if we can avoid destructive violence in the meantime.

A. There are two thoughts that come from that, from what you have said, one is this. Speaking of the widening gap between Negro and white you were talking about, what about the widening gap that is pointed out by -- well -- many people -- Mr. Whitney Young being one -- between the Negro masses in the slum, and the successful middle-class upperclass, the draining of leadership, you know, in

terms of economic split.

Yes, I was just about to come to that -- this is heightening very rapidly in the Negro community now. You find between the middle-class and the working class Negro, we find it within CORE.

A. Non-working class --

Non-working class -- the unemployed, yes, we find it within CORE, since the four chapters have become mass movements. People walked in off the streets and joined the organization and we have wanted them -- we have longed for their presence in the organization -- so we are pleased that this has happened. Yet we find that increasing tension between the established Negro middle-class and the Negro "lower class" -- sometimes it shows itself in superficialities such as -- who wears a coat and a tie and who doesn't wear a coat and a tie -- who has a car and who doesn't have a car -- who lives in a house in the country and who lives in a tenement slum in New York -- sometimes it becomes a status symbol to live in a tenement slum.

A. Inverted status.

Inverted status, yes, I think this is very unfortunate, if there is anything the Negro in this country cannot afford is that class of delineation and conflict -- we can't afford that kind of division.

A. Either way -- now what can be done about it -- if as this distrust or lack of contact where the leadership has come from -- it is bound to come from the educated class of Negroes. Now, if there is a loss of contact there, then what is the next thing? What is the danger of the next thing?

I didn't quite understand --

A. If the leadership, by and large, naturally has come from -- and it always does come from people of education and who have had the opportunities and the chance for reflection -- it comes from the upperclass Negroes -- college people -- with a few exceptions but by and large. Now, if the gap is widening between that class and the masses of unemployed and unemployables, and the slum and the slum casual worker and these people -- the oppressed depressed menace -- if that gap is widening, then what?

Well, I think what we are finding happening now is that a number of new Negro leaders are springing up from the Negro working class and the lower class generally. Many of these persons have not had much education -- they have developed a feeling, however, for the struggle for civil rights -- they have developed some falsity in the use of ^{the} techniques of nonviolent direct action, and I suspect that some of them will grow in prominence.

A. If they follow that general line of growth, good and well, but there are so many possibilities of other lines of development from the cause of this split, seem to be. If the non-violence and the general policies that you represent are taped as belonging to the now alienated middle-class Negro -- educated Negro -- then the other leader has his in denying that policy -- some impossible leaders. What signs of that danger are there now, if any? Am I making myself clear? This I mean -- if there is a real alienation or movement toward alienation between the now leadership class of the Negro movement -- people of education -- people of various sorts of contact with the world outside -- this class from the slum Negro. Now the slum leaders, as

they arise -- some as you have indicated, will follow the same line that is now followed by a basic Negro leadership; but there is also a great temptation either for power or out of ignorance and sense of oppression and desperation to follow a line of violence in the slum leadership -- it was seen in the cards.

Well, I am not sure that that is true really, I think that one finds as much anger now among the Negro middle-class, as one finds among the lower class.

A. But does the lower class identify with this anger in the middle-class -- or is the gap so great that he can't conceal that the middle-class looks like an alien to him.?

He looks like an alien -- he looks like a person who is no longer black -- he is white --

A. White collar makes him white --

Yes, makes him white. ~~I think~~ A favorite saying now among Negroes is "So-and-so, he used to be black" -- I heard somebody refer to Ralph Bunch in that way -- "What do you think of Ralph Bunch?" you know -- "Well, he ~~x~~ used to be black, but now has become white". I think what is more apt to happen is there will be great patrician among Negro leadership now, based in large part upon the fastest of the footwork -- whether people are able to adapt to the vocabulary and the terminology -- of the masses, yes. Look at one man who has such fast footwork and adaptability is Adam Clayton Powell. Now Powell has no real relationship with the rank in file lower class Negroes --

the one thing that
A. He himself that he does have -- [↑]he claims to have --
Yes -- he hasn't really -- he is far removed -- power with three

houses and four cars --

A. He says "I am the only slum dweller among all

But he is not a slum dweller -- he keeps officially a little apartment someplace in Harlem -- but this mansion in Puerto Rico and a house in White Plains and everything else -- yet, Powell knows the ~~xxxx~~ r , he knows the r and he can speak to it, he can use it and he becomes thus a lower class Negro leader, which is the most ironic thing you could imagine. Malcolm, another one. Now Malcolm is not lower class -- Malcolm has a home out in Jamaica, Long Island -- a house and yard, Malcolm drives a new Oldsmobile, Malcolm wears two hundred dollar suits and expensive hand-made shirts -- but Malcolm has a r and the footwork to keep in pace with the changing mood of people -- he doesn't lead them but he reflects it and verbalizes what they are thinking -- so I suspect that there is going to be an attrition among Negro leadership, depending upon their adaptability to this, and their ability to speak with the proper vocabulary. Now Baldwin is a writer who has that vocabulary and thus has appeal to the lower class Negro. I have been absolutely amazed to see lower class Negroes working class unemployed and unemployeed Negroes, reading Baldwin's books -- probably the first books they have read -- reading them laboriously, but reading them -- I am sure not understanding what he is saying, but getting a feeling -- that I dig this guy because he digs me, saying what I would like to say.

A. Now the other question that came to mind out of what you said earlier, was this -- about the gap between the white man and the Negro, you see, the decreasing gap. Many people tend to think

of the problem as one of prejudice -- stamping it out, putting it out, putting it out. Now, maybe there isn't an immediate problem on the part of white man or Negro either -- you see -- there is mutual prejudice, and in some quarters increasing prejudice, as you have pointed out. Maybe the point is, to know what to do with the prejudice -- what is recognized -- transcend the prejudice in terms of not saying -- take it, we don't have it -- say, what do we do with it, now that we have it, we've got it. That is a different problem psychologically, isn't it? -- and morally.

I think it is, very much so.

A. But in that kind of sentimentality on both sides of the fence among certain people -- that you extricate prejudice for social solutions and then get your social solutions.

Yes there is, indeed. runs into a great deal of it. Sometimes it is put in the context of whether we are for legislation or not -- and we cannot legislate the prejudice out of the hearts of men -- somehow you have got to find some way of getting it out otherwise, reach it, but actually the laws don't try to speak to prejudice -- they merely try to control men's behavior, so that part of the prejudice they have ^{does} ~~is~~ not illegally damage other citizens.

A. Now if the stage to make them confront their prejudice, rather than try to persuade them that they don't have any -- now they try to say they don't have any -- that is what I am getting at, you see, the sentimental view is to say "Well, you don't have it" -- "I don't have it".

Yes, yes, exactly. This is what we have been trying to say in

the North; and the reason we started stepping up our demonstrations in the North more than a year ago, because so many northerners deceived themselves in thinking that they were not prejudiced -- the ideal thing was to be without prejudice, so they ascertained that they were without prejudice -- when nothing could have been farther from the truth. We hoped through some of the demonstrations that we undertook, to force them to confront their own prejudices and to admit that they existed -- they determine what they were going to do about it. I think we partially succeeded in that.

A. That is the point I am getting at -- as opposed to the sentimental view that you persuade each other that you don't have it.

Yes, right. I think that this is a more realistic interpretation of what is happening today, than the concept of the white backlash -- people are confronting the feelings which have, heretofore, been submerged.

A. Now, a question relating to that -- there are some people who take the Negro movement, or revolution or problem, in the light of good guys against bad guys -- evil against good.

Well, I of course, do not believe in the devil theory of history -- nor do I think that there are angels and that anyone who happens to be opposed to us is a completely depraved human being. What we always try to say in the nonviolent direct action movement. And I confess that as we grow larger, we get farther away from it. We try to look at the enemy and say "There but for the grace of God, go I" -- and to realize that he is in large measure, the creature of his environment and of the conditioning -- the social conditioning, and that if our experiences have been identical with

his, then we probably would share many of his present biases. It is this belief and this platform which has served as the philosophical theoretical basis of the nonviolent movement.

A. Now, to say it back -- do you place the moral issue in the context of human conditions. In other words, the conditioning is the equivalent of forgiveness.

Yes, exactly -- and also it recognizes the possibility of human change.

A. By the same token --

By the same token.

A. Lets jump ahead a second -- lets take a time, date unspecified, when there will be fair employment, you know -- practice-- and there will be a decent housing legislation with some teeth in it and things -- you know -- ~~voter~~ voter registration -- all the rest -- those things -- obvious things -- points of struggle -- then what? What remains to be done? Suppose you have those things, you see.

Well, assuming that then we have broken down the wall.

A. You have at least official integration -- you have reasonable fair employment, situations -- integrated schools -- those things. Then what?

Then you have to build the bridges. First the walls come down, then the bridges go up -- then if the thrust changes from desegregation to integration, and here one's definition of integration becomes very pertinent, at this point.

A. At this point, what is the Negro's responsibility -- what is his phase -- what is his responsibility?

He has many responsibilities -- one of his chief responsibilities is to prepare himself to live in an integrated society.

A. You have a problem over the white man's problem, there.

Yes, that is right, and it is a difficult situation because we are moving against that now -- moving away from it. In the Negro community, there is a greater sentiment toward nationalism, and after we have broken down the walls -- it is really a contradictory and confused type of struggle. Many of the same people who speak in behalf of segregation, are one day or the next day, fighting against specific forms of segregation. Malcolm X, for example -- when Malcolm joined the second school boycott, which was obviously for desegregation of the schools -- yet he speaks for separation. I have sort of lost the point here, now.

A. We were talking about the paradox of the Negroes responsibilities being parallel with the white man's responsibilities, on the question of integration -- after we have the formal matters taken care of -- you know, after we have desegregation of schools, you know, fair employment practice -- teeth in it -- these things -- civil rights, etc. -- voting --

After we have all of that, and if these laws we have are implemented --

A. Let us assume that.

-- Then Negro leadership will either have to change its focus, or Negro leadership itself will have to change -- or be changed. It is pretty much like the trade union operation -- I spent some years as a trade union organizer, and when the organizers began organizing and preparing for election, we had to be

agitators -- our work was an agitational work -- "the boss was a beast," had to be the slogan -- but then after we had won the election, we found that we had to live with the boss, we had to sit down with the boss and we had to negotiate a contract which controlled our activities as well as his activity. What we usually had to do was to pull out the organizer and then send in others-- send in negotiators.

A. Who wouldn't have to take it back.

Who wouldn't have to take it back, but they could start fresh, you know, "well, that was somebody else who said that" --

A. He was mistaken --

Yes, I am saying something different. Now, sometimes you find a rare individual who could do both, but that is extraordinary.

A. Now we are up against the question of tactics -- psychological tactics. On one end, if you preach say -- the state of the Negro history -- it has a double appeal -- one is bound to be to erase superiorities -- inevitably we have that, only it enters into it inevitably. There is a casualty possible there, like the casualty in the study of southern history -- Confederacy

of the sould, in certain sorts -- I want to keep the facts straight. That liability to build great reasonable to build irrational

Does leadership just simply this problem as an inevitable risk, or it can be kept on a rational level in the ^{process} ~~first~~ ~~process~~?

I think it can be kept on a rational level in the process. I think that it is important, ^{that} in the teaching of Negro history in the schools, it ~~was~~ should not be taught as a separate subject, but

be taught in the terms of the Negroes' contribution to American History -- just as we study the contributions of other peoples in American History. I think it is possible -- I certainly think it is possible for the Negro to be proud of the contributions that have been made by people who happened to have been Negroes. But to be equally proud of contributions that have been made by other peoples, and equally proud of the cultures which other people represent.

A. It is tough, though, isn't it?

Its tough, but I have seen this sort of mutual pride in individuals, and I think it can be true in .

A. It can be, but in certain obvious limits. Lets shift -- what do you think of Lincoln?

What do I think of ~~him~~ him?

A. Yes -- as a man -- how do you assess his -- not his symbolic role -- but his human and ethical role?

Well, it is so difficult -- this far removed from him -- to look at the real Lincoln as opposed to the mythical Lincoln, and I am not a Lincoln scholar or Lincoln authority, so I am not sure how much ~~is~~ is myth and how much was the man. My own opinion, however, is that Lincoln was not the great emancipator, as he is generally pictured to be. From some of his which I do not think were taken out of context --

A. There is a strong bit of evidence right at that point.

Yes, that his objective was not really to free the Negroes -- his objective was to save the Union.

A. He said so -- he also was a racist --

He didn't believe in intermarriage, for one thing.

A. He just said inferiority, period. So did Jefferson.

Of course. I think though, that here you have got to look at these men and their historical context -- they were not omniscient, and were not able to speak from the vantage point of the anthropological and sociological and psychological knowledge that we have now.

A. Dealing with the defacto -- inferiority -- he said "This is terrible, but this is absolute".

Yes, that's right, of course it is absolute. Well, people always consider things to be absolute when they are not aware of the historical context.

A. What you are saying -- I want to say it back to myself -- that you would not make abstract moral judgments, you would say you must put them in their historical context --

I think we must -- yes -- I think we must.

A. Tie that to your previous remarks about anyone's prejudices at any one given moment -- conditioned by history -- personal history -- additioned by his personal history and the society that he has grown up in -- Tie this to the other thing you said about the personal prejudices -- how he transcends conditions with them -- how he transcends.

How does he transcend?

A. You said that about growth in moral , but I was just tying the general historical principles with what you said about individuals -- that is all I am trying to do. I was just trying to put them in the same package, psychologically.

Oh, I see, yes. I would accept that.

A. What about Kennedy? Was he in the process of growth, do you think -- or do you know?

President Kennedy? Oh, I think he was growing some -- I certainly am almost ~~nauseated~~ nauseated by the current deification of Kennedy -- especially on the civil rights issue, because this is not accurate -- historically accurate. If the relationship which I had with him were valid at all -- I had several conversations with him, and if my feeling was that the President did intellectualize civil rights issue and intellectualized it well, but I saw no depth of feeling there on his part. It became a rather cold intellectual issue and a political issue with him. He moved only when there was sufficient pressure that he had to move.

A. Birmingham being the big watershed.

Birmingham was a big watershed, yes, it was only after Birmingham that he came out saying that this was a moral issue, you know -- before then, it had been a legal issue.

A. Do you think that part of deification has been because the Negro need for a symbol?

No, I don't think so. I don't think the Negro had anything to do with the deification of Kennedy -- the Negro merely accepted the deification which was -- with which he was stampeded through the mass mediam.

A. As useful? Cynically, as a useful symbol or just ignorantly accepting it.

Oh, no, ignorantly accepting it -- one accepts it, you know,

it is superimposed and doesn't rationalize it or think it through.

A. Have you seen Harry Goldwin's book called "Kennedy and the Negro"?

I have a copy of it, yes -- I've only scanned it and haven't read it carefully.

A. Well, you won't agree with it, not from what you said.

I don't think I will agree with it

A. He makes him the second coming.

Oh, yes, but this is not unusual, you know, for a man to become dead, what he was not in his life -- on an issue like this. It has happened many times before.

A. How do you take John Brown? Or have you read his story?

Yes, I've read his works. Yes, I think he was an extremely dedicated person, and got intoxicated, from what I observe -- so this is his destiny.

A. Yes, he did.

I know -- speaking of the very frequent -- making a man what he was not before his death - is going to give an award to Sidney Hillman for civil rights activity. Somebody asked Dubinsky, but Dubinsky-"Sidney Hillman didn't do anything on civil rights -- when did he become a great civil rights leader?" But Dubinsky with his great wisdom said "After he died".

A. D was going to keep a diary down in his back room, you know, said "Now dies the man, now is born the myth".

Yes, yes, yes. I think really, that Johnson is much more for

