

CONVERSATION WITH MR. JAMES FARMER

A. You were saying, Mr. Farmer, that there is a kind of pure verbalism involved in the competition for control or for the enforcing of certain policies.

Yes. Right now it is easy for a man to become a Negro leader, or be accepted as a Negro leader. If he makes speeches, which are militant enough, if he makes speeches which capture the press sufficiently, then he becomes recognized, at least temporarily, as a Negro leader -- on the basis of pure verbalism -- without having any following, without having any organization behind him, and without taking any action. One example of that incidentally, is Malcolm X. Malcolm has done nothing except verbalize -- his militancy is a matter of , there has been no action thus far. Well, Malcolm can survive a long time on that, because Malcolm happens to be a man of rather unusual abilities.

A. Great magnetism.

Great magnetism, or whatever you want to call it, but there will come a point where Malcolm is going to have to chirp or get off the perch, or he is going to have to take some action or stop poking, because the words will sound hollow, and I am sure that he realizes this diemna that he is facing -- he is not an activist, really.

A. You think he is moving toward a political action -- political involvement, or is that an appropriate question.

Well, he says he is, he says he believes that he is trying to develop political activity within Harlem.

A. "Responsible, mature Negro politics" -- "Mature Negro politics", as he phrases it.

Mr. Elster

He says "Mature Negro Politics", yes. Well, here Malcolm needs to define what he means by "Mature Negro Politics".

A. He defined to me in this way, when I asked him -- he said "This means making our Negro representatives really responsible to us, the Negro community". If you ask "Do you accept the proposed?" - there is no answer.

Yes. Well, this is the problem with Malcolm right now, he is trying to evolve a position -- trying to find a platform. The old script that he had was taken away from him when he left the nation of Islam, and now he is floating around, trying to bring together a new script and I don't know where he is coming out. I suspect that he is going to be an integrationist before long, and I think that he was trying to prepare the grounds for that when he sent back those various letters and postcards from Africa. I've got a couple of them here which he indicated that his old anti-white views apparently did not hold up to the ^{realities} ~~reality~~ that he found.

A. Of the white member of the Mohammedan faith.

-- Of the Mohammedan faith. Now, I would say, on the question of leadership, too, that Whitney Young is absolutely right -- that the press has been irresponsible, partly out of ignorance, I think, and sometimes I suspect out of a deliberate attempt to create conflict within Negro leadership and the Negro Community.

A. You think that really some of this deliberate divide-and-rule policy?

I think there is some of that -- there is some divide-and-rule -- and also the fact that a reporter wants to make it, he wants to move ahead with his paper and this is always news -- conflict is news,

agreement is not news.. But we find that on occasions, some fellow who happens to be a Negro, who makes a speech, gets the ear of a reporter and whispers something that happens to be newsworthy at that point, finds himself overnight, a Negro leader. He can't maintain that position because he has no following and he doesn't have the substance, but for the time being, he is a Negro leader.

A. Lets turn from that for the moment, to the matter of demonstration. Let us say that -- I know your view on it -- the non-violent demonstration -- that is clear, I am not talking about that distinction -- violent and nonviolent. I am talking about what it might be called 'legitimate nonviolent demonstration' as opposed by 'illegitimate nonviolent demonstration' or you recognize the distinction of that sort. Lets take a practical case. Here you are opposed to stall ins -- that, for some reason, is illegitimate in your mind, or at least inappropriate. I am groping to see the distinction in terms of social -- general social reference, between one kind of demonstration and another kind of demonstration. I am groping for some kind of distinction of that sort, if it exists in your mind.

Inappropriate I would say. Well, you see, it is difficult for you to lay down guide lines as a generalization as to what is acceptable as a demonstration and what is not acceptable. This fact was pointed up to me this morning in the New York Times, where Javitz is calling upon Negro leaders to issue statements saying the acceptable boundaries for demonstrations -- where do we stop -- and what is acceptable and what isn't. I don't think that it is possible to do that, because what may be acceptable in New York, is not acceptable in Chicago. What may be acceptable in Plaquemine Louisiana, is

not acceptable in New York City.

A. Or around the other way.

Yes. What is acceptable today -- or what is not acceptable today, may be acceptable a year hence. For example, the stall in. I was not opposed to the stall in on principle -- I was opposed to it in tactics and timing. I considered the stall in to be essentially a revolutionary tactic which requires a revolutionary situation -- revolutionary circumstances.

A. Explain that, will you please, sir?

Well, I will try to. I would consider a stall in -- a massive stall in -- to be in the same category with a general strike -- a general work stoppage -- the revolutionary tactic -- and I think it requires certain prerequisites, it has certain prerequisites.

1. Unity in the Negro community.
2. An almost absolute polarization existing between the races.

Neither of those things were true in the New York context at this time.

A. That would be a desperate measure -- a revolutionary measure.

It would be a desperate measure, yes. In Plaquemine Louisiana, I have recommended to the Negro community there, that they explore the idea of a general strike -- work stoppage. I think here you have the total polarization, here you have absolute unity, so that such an extreme measure would be justified in my view and would be workable; while in New York, it would be neither justifiable nor workable.

A. In other words, you are saying that two questions are

to yourself so you understand what you are saying.

There is the element of a social reference involved in the matter of --

in two ways.

1. The social reference to the nature of this total community -- this being "illegitimate" when there is a opinion in the overall community -- there is no polarization -- very little polarization, because you do not want to violate the social structure, as it were -- they guy hurrying to deliver a baby

2. The second kind of social reference would be the amount of violence -- violence which has been practiced against the Negro movement.

Those are the two kinds of social reference that are involved here.

That would be true, yes.

A. These are guide lines of another sort, from what Me. Javitz is asking for, is that right?

I would agree, yes, to that. Also the extent to which you have been able to get dialogue otherwise, and in New York, at least we have had dialogue -- we haven't made the progress that we've wanted, but I did not feel that the stall in tactic was justified at that time.

A. Oscar Hanlin says there is a danger in certain northern cities where there is a dialogue -- use your word -- going on, and some gains are being made and some being successful, In using the demonstration for what can be achieved by the dialogue, the possibility of overplaying the demonstration. Now I assume he is talking about the two events in New York City -- the stall ins and boycott -- the context of this passage in the

book -- I assume he is talking about that. At least he is much concerned about that question of "What is the relation of demonstration to negotiation"?

Well, I think that they are not contradictory at all -- they are not mutually exclusive. We find that demonstrations ~~of~~ are frequently the catalyst -- gets action in negotiation, that spurs the dialogue. Sometimes demonstrations actually start the dialogue.

A. You can't lead, except in strength.

That's right, yes, except from strength. Before ~~then~~ demonstrations started, and by demonstrations I mean massive demonstrations -- say from Birmingham -- there was very little discussion, constructive discussion; lots of talk but no real action, and the talk went on intermidably and the gains were negligible, but after the demonstrations began, people recognized the urgency of it. We would like to even have had a civil rights bill introduced in Congress --

A. It is coming to that. Birmingham was a catalyst for the civil rights bill.

That is right, yes. Birmingham movement failed in Birmingham, it succeeded elsewhere.

A. How much of a psychological element is involved in of demonstration -- simply the affirmation of identity -- the affirmation of self and of courage, on the part of the Negro community -- the demonstration. Is that a significant factor?

I think that is a very profound point, it is indeed. I consider it to be one of the most valuable functions of demonstration -- to weld a group of people together in unity -- to stimulate their

motivation, and to recruits. Many people will come into the movement because they see action in the street -- they can see it, it is visible -- they can participate in it, they can walk and get tired.

A. Robert Moses, himself.

Yes, yes, exactly -- of course. They can walk and get tired, then they are doing something and they will never be the same again.

A. Now tell me this -- on the other side -- I read this in Lewy Lomax's book, not the "Black Moslem" but the other one -- dirty one -- "The Negro Revolt" -- that even in Montgomery -- he is puzzled on this fact -- that a short time after the victory there, you see, and Montgomery association victory, that the first time there was a general state meeting of the SCLC in Birmingham for the rally on the last night, no church was made available -- not even the one Dr. A had previously held, and Dr. King and Dr. Dexter, too. Something had happened there despite this victory -- something had happened in the community. Do you know anything about the situation?

No, I don't. I didn't remember that passage from Lomax's book.

A. Now, wait a minute -- I am wrong -- Lomax says something that is equivalent to that -- little was achieved in Birmingham -- he was puzzled about the fact that little was achieved in Birmingham. No, this citation of fact fx was from S book. He quotes Lomax in connection as supporting . He is puzzled by it, too, he doesn't even know the answer to this. Something had happened in the Negro community there -- something had happened but he didn't know what.

Well, I suspect that one thing that had happened was some internecine warfare within the movement, and that frequently happens as you approach a conclusion.

A. Well, of course, Lomax does make a great point about the fact that work in many communities.

on this question, by the way, he said that he was perfectly right about me, but he was wrong about everybody else. He was right about me -- then he attacks Lomax as being irresponsible he said "On that point, he is right." That question -- what I am getting at is this -- what is the seed planted by the demonstration in a general Negro community -- nationwide community or local communities. Is it psychological or is it or both -- a matter of practical gains, a matter of participation -- what is this significance? You have already answered one thing -- the psychological.

I think it is psychological -- I think it is organizational, too, and that it helps to recruit -- it helps to build a movement. We found that we have to have demonstrations, if we are building a movement -- they are absolutely necessary.

A. You can't build them on paper.

You can't build them on paper, nor can you build a movement on negotiations, and this poses a dilemma for us. Very often our campaigns are successful in the negotiation stage, and then you find that you lose your momentum, and you find another issue and it becomes all the more difficult to regain the momentum and take action. That is why it is hard for the civil rights movement or any part of it to call off demonstrations which have been planned. It is extremely

difficult to do that. We have called them off -- we do it because we think it is necessary to do it sometimes, if progress is being made in negotiations -- but we recognize that we may be killing the movement. In North Carolina negotiations got under way the summer before last, even talked with the governor and he made certain promises and set up committees -- on this basis of this, we called off demonstrations, held them in abeyance. The governor's committees were unsuccessful -- they gave a progress report, after we were insistent upon it -- the progress report was "no progress". Well, we had lost momentum, we had lost all the steam and it took us another year to get things organized again. This time we didn't make the same mistake. So I think we have to have demonstrations, we have to be flexible -- be prepared to call them off at times -- but when you call them off, we have learned that we have to have some other action for the people to get involved in immediately.

A. Now, what about this distinction -- this is really getting at it but I want to try to get it clear in my mind, if possible. Demonstrations with a target, you see, and demonstrations without a target -- now, there is a positive distinction, isn't there?

Yes, there is a distinction -- a very important distinction. I think under certain circumstances, both are valid. Demonstration ^{as} ~~has~~ a protest is a valid thing -- without a target -- just protest against segregation. As many of the marchers in the South -- the marchers in Birmingham -- the marchers in Albany, and that sort of thing -- targets were not specific there -- this was a protest against segregation -- a demand for freedom now, which is a slogan and not a program, of course -- I think it had believability. I believe

that it is more valid and more meaningful, however, to have specific targets picked out with accuracy, and the action tailored to achieve the objective which you have in mind.

A. In that case when you have a target -- that means that you can have also leadership control more easily isn't it?

Yes, that's right, and also you have a chance of winning the victory, and victory is important now. The reason the civil rights revolution is in trouble is because victories have been too few in the past year.

A. Now, are you following the same line of thought that Whitney Young follows there?

How is that?

A. We must have victories in order to maintain responsible control.

Well, I would say, to maintain direction -- I wouldn't say control. I don't think we have ever had control, really.

A. Well, I don't think -- he said to maintain responsible leadership, I think you said.

Yes, well, my only argument with Whitney on this is the meaning of responsible.

A. Well, let us go into that.

Yes. You see, I have been accused sometimes of being irresponsible -- other times I have been accused, and I will use the same word, of being responsible. Because of the ^{current} civil rights contacts, this is an accusation -- to tell a Negro leader that he is a responsible person, because this means then that he is alienated -- or there is a gap between him and the people he is supposed to be

leading -- it becomes a kiss of death!

A. You mean responsible Uncle Tom.

Yes, to put it bluntly, that is what it means -- usually we consider a person responsible who agrees with us or who

A. If a white press calls a Negro responsible, he is calling him an Uncle Tom, in the eyes of the Negro leaders on that same piece of ~~press~~ paper, same newspaper.

Yes, I don't want any reporter to call me 'responsible', or to call me a moderating influence -- some have -- I denied that -- I'm as militant as the next.

A. Well, your mothers are different -- you're stuck with that, aren't you?

Yes, of course I'm stuck with it.

A. Well, this is back to you and Dr. King and some others -- the notion, the one that Dr. Kenneth Clark has analyzed -- that this nonviolent, Gandhian, Christian, T approach, means that the white is loaded to a sense of security. If he doesn't get shot in the back at retaliation, he says "O.K. you don't have to do very much".

Well, I don't think that this is true at all -- I discussed it with Ken Clark -- I don't agree with Ken ~~Clark~~ Clark on that, I think that nonviolence in its classical sense, or in its practical sense as used in this country, can lull anybody to sleep. Look at what happened to Woolworth in 1960 -- during the student sit ins -- there was a nationwide boycott, which is a classical nonviolent direct action technique. Woolworth admitted in its annual report to its stockholders, that they had -- that profits had gone down in

the year 1960 -- it doesn't mean they lost money, but it means that the curve of profits went down, and they gave as one of the three reasons for that drop in profits, a nationwide boycott against their stores. I don't think that anybody is going to be lulled in a sense of security while he is losing money. Many people would rather have you hit them over the head than hit them over the pocketbook.

A. James Baldwin and others report that the southern mob does not represent the majority wheel of the South. That is the phrase -- Billy Morrow phrase. Baldwin uses it and others repeat this phrase.

Well, I would in general terms, agree with that. I am inclined to think that what exists is a continuum really, with a few persons at both polls and the great mass of opinion in the South as in the North, for that matter, being somewhere in the middle -- various places on the scale; and I think that the mob -- the violent mob represents one extreme which has the sympathy, either varying degrees of activeness or pasiveness, are the large part of the population, generally.

A. It is permitted, anyway.

It is permitted, yes, and sometimes it is permitted, it is whipped at and sometimes supported.

A. According to some commentators, analysts -- the whole Negro movement is bases on a crisis in the discovery of identity -- history, personality -- identity -- my relation as Negro to the world around me. My definition of myself. You know, of course, I have read this a thousand times. I want to proposition -- there is a similar crisis of identity for the Southerner.

There are some things that underly segregation -- or the opposition to desegregation -- that the Southerner sees it to be himself, to be a Southerner, he must support a certain definition of his role as his identity. Now, if he is ignorant, he sees segregation as part of that definition himself, that he has also having a crisis of identity -- his relationship to America and the human race involved. It is a real crisis of his identity -- that is why it is so fundamentally difficult for many Southerners -- cross that line -- they feel they are selling out some , also selling out themselves in some way -- does this make sense to you?

I think that it makes a great deal of sense. I hadn't thought of it in exactly those terms.

A. people who are stuck with that.

I think it makes a great deal of sense, indeed -- I don't think it is the whole answer --

A. No, economic elements involved.

Yes, of course there are economic elements. Then there are problems -- maybe this is a part of this struggle for identity of the Southerner that you were talking about, that the poorer Southerners have a psychological need to feel superior to somebody -- it happens to be the Negro.

A. It happens to be the Negroes -- between them and the bare ~~black~~ black ground.

Somebody told me a story of a mythical city -- of a hypothetical city, rather -- that had voted to move Negroes out of town. All the Negroes would be removed from the city, and a reporter saw a white woman standing on a corner crying. He said "Why are you

crying?" She said "They are going to move all the niggers out of town". He said "Do you like niggers?" She said "No, I hate them". "Then, why are you crying?" She said "Well, who am I going to be better than?"

A. That's the old story, admitted by many.

Yes, I think it is. One sees it particularly in a state like Mississippi -- to go back to Mississippi again, where poverty is so deep among white as well as among Negro, and generally one finds greater anti-Negro sentiment among the poorer whites -- who have nothing to be proud of except their skin color.

A. Charles Evars and many other people, including Miss Lucy Fountain of ~~Harwood~~ Harwood -- have said that they have hopes for a settlement in the South -- even in Mississippi, says Charles Evars, before and elsewhere and more fundamental sentiment. Mr. Evars says that the staunch segregationists use this phrase --

some primitive code respect for courage. He is having to face now for the first time, straight, simple raw courage on the part of a number of Negroes -- he may not like it, he respects it -- this gives a basis for communication, Wilkins says. Another thing he says, just the minute he talks to you to negotiate, he has crossed the line already

. He just bases his hopes on that.

Frankly, I think he is being naive. I think he is being truly naive. Well, first of all, negotiations have been going on in the South for many, many years, ever since slavery. Negotiations were temporarily broken off about 1954, at the time of the Supreme Court Decision. The question was not negotiation or communication, the

question was the agenda, and the fact is the agenda has changed now. Heretofore, the agenda was moderating segregation, or making it more acceptable, more humane.

A. Isn't that the pattern of all revolutionary movements -- you move from the to the moment of the unveiling of the real issues?

Yes, yes, I think it is, and I think that that is what has happened here. As to whether the Southern white man has gained a great respect for Negroes because of their ~~wise~~ courage -- I am inclined to doubt it now. I am inclined to doubt it. I think that this was true in 1960 -- that many people changed their image then, when they saw the students sit ins.

A. Do you think that the change is back now to the early image?

No, I just don't think that it has moved any further in that direction. I think the student sit ins did a great deal to shake up the image -- even on Southerners such as Kilpatrick, editor of Richmond News Leader, had much quoted editorial at that point -- pointing out there was almost a switching of stereotypes. The well-dressed Negro college student sitting there reading , while the mob outside -- leather-jacketed, duck-tail haircut, boys swearing and grinning sillily, waiting for them. But I think that with the mass demonstrations of Negroes, you have not seen any noticeable change in the respect that whites have had for them.

A. Well, I'm thinking merely, I guess, of what my limited observation with Southerners I know and some Northerners too, insofar as you can have your own little poll taking, how it has been effective.

You think it has been effective?

A. How do I know? For 50 people I can say, they have felt about like this -- how it stacks up. These are preselected too, just by way of life. Let me ask you a question different from that. The Negro is stereotype of the white man -- but the inversion is stereotype of the Negro in certain quotas -- What about the Negro stereotype of the white man -- what was it to begin with and what is it now? What was it 15 years ago? There probably was contradiction of the white man to the Negro.

Of course there were contradictions, yes, but lets look at the South -- you know how difficult it is to generalize anyplace -- but in many communities in the South, Negroes felt that there were good white people, that there was this paternalism which was accepted. Now, this is changing. I look at Plaquemine, Louisiana, and after the massive police brutality of the tear gasses, the c and the horses that trampled people -- the ~~sans~~ ^{saying in} Negro community then was "The only good white man is a dead one". "Say, did you know that old Mrs. Johnson's boy was riding one of those horses with the c , I always thought he was a good white man" -- and here he was, hitting Negroes over the heads with sticks and sticking them with c and riding the horses. So I think that the Negro image of the white in the South has hardened.

A. In general or --

I think in general. This has run parallel with the development, the rising of the national sentiment of Negro community.

A. Is that only in the South, or is that all over?

I think to some extent, it is applicable all over, but it is

more sharply seen in the South.

A. In Cleveland I am told, it is very sharp. This is Miss Turner -- spend an afternoon with her. She said this -- polarization is almost absolute there.

Is that so? This is very interesting -- this is one of the reasons that CORE feels very important, to have white staff members as well as Negro staff members. Now, in Plaquemines, Louisiana, after polarization became complete, the Negroes thought that all whites were against them. I made it a point to call an office and have them send in some of our white field secretaries to work with the Negro community. In Plaquemines , yes, and it tended to work -- well, it worked in a way -- in a subtle way -- they accepted these persons

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See Tape #4