

CONVERSATION - ROBERT PENN WARREN and BAYARD RUSTIN

RPW: Now, talking - I'm just going to plunge in - at some point along the way I would like to have you talk a little bit about your biography, if you will, but suppose we start with this general topic first. It's very commonly said that you, almost rare in - almost unique in this sense - certainly rare - that your involvement in the Civil Rights movement has been primarily in terms of - quote - wealth, you see, rather than in terms of race. You have that special kind of intersection of these two concerns.

BR: Well, I think that's true. As you probably know, I was at one time a member of the Young Communist League. I became a member fundamentally because at that time it was my feeling, even if mistaken later, that it was only the Communists who were sincerely concerned - this was at the time of the Scotsboro case and this kind of thing - and I felt the others were not militant enough. This also came from the fact that I had for some time felt that certain problems which the American Negro faced could not be solved as race problems, but that many aspects of our society would need some change or to change prior to the Negro's gains of certain status. Now therefore when I left the Communist Party I went to work for the Fellowship of Reconciliation which had with it the Reverend A. J. Mustie who for many years had been a social reformer. After that I then went into the Socialist Movement.

RPW: Now what date was it, the year of your going into the Fellowship of Reconciliation?

BR: 1941. And this happened because, if you will remember in June

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of '41 I hit the term _____ and the Communist Party then violated what were to me two sacred trusts. One was peace as a Quaker and what had become an imperialist - what was to them at that point in the imperialist war became overnight a people's war. Plus the fact that they then called me in and told me not to work against discrimination in the armed forces any longer. This brought me to my senses in terms that I saw that these people were not truly interested in justice wherever it existed, but in justice if it was in keeping with the foreign policy of the Soviet Union.

RPW: Justice of the two, in other words.

BR: That's right - yes.

RPW: Let me interrupt a second now and check this to be sure we're doing all right on this - all right - so we're doing all right then.

Will you go ahead, sir?

BR: Well, now, I would say that the emergence of intense industrialization bringing more and more Negroes into our large cities, the movement of the white middle classes out of our cities, the emergence of automation, _____ and other aspects of the technological revolution, have all the more convinced me that when Negro groups talk about preferential treatment in a _____ Negroes to uplift them economically, when in fact many whites are simultaneously being put out of work, and when Negroes are ~~all~~ prepared to do many types of work, indicates to me all the more now that it is essential to have certain basic forms of social change in our economic and social institutions if it is possible to accommodate, not only the

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Negro with whom I am concerned but the poor white. Next we would find that Negroes and whites will be fighting each other in the streets for a few jobs which do not exist and fighting each other in the streets about jobs which do not in fact exist for the underprivileged. Therefore, I have come to believe out of this that it is imperative that we - that Negroes and whites (interruption)

RPW: We were talking about automation and the propagation of rights and Negroes, jobs or non-existent jobs.

BR: Right. And under these circumstances I came to see that we would have to build in this country a political movement - a new political movement. I do not mean a political party, but the kind of political movement which got the civil rights legislation through Congress. This was a movement made up of civil rights groups, other minority peoples, the best elements in the trade union movement, the churches played a magnificent role - that is, the religious groups, Catholic, Protestant and Jewish, the intellectual students. There was a great consensus of congealing here of all the best elements in our society which broke the back of the filibuster and got legislation through Congress, the first important social legislation since 1938. Now, I would like to see that same kind of coalition of forces ~~backing~~ a number of things which mean really quite fundamental change.

RPW: You would see it in terms of existing political properties, is that right?

BR: I would see it in two terms, that existing elements in both the

political parties would come together, but in a sense that is re-aligning the political parties and making over and above the general political party structure a force which as it moves then moves the parties. For an example, I think that the party that negatively Goldwater is having some of that effect, and positively I think the civil rights movement is forcing things a little more open and Mr. Thurmond is leaving the Democratic Party and going into the Republican Party is another illustration of the kind of thing. It isn't so - it's not only important that there should be such a political force. The important thing is, what is it dedicated to? And I think it has to be dedicated to full employment, it has to be dedicated to public works, not public works as of the '30's, where you just give men jobs until the economic situation opens up, because many of these men will never again be employed. It has to be in terms of training. I think also we have to re-define what work is now, and an illustration of what I mean is this - that I believe that now we must recognize that the work of the young people is to develop their minds and skills for the benefit of society. There is no more sacred work. Therefore, I think that high school and college students who could not afford it should have not only their books paid for and their tuition paid - if necessary, get a salary in order to make it possible for them to consider their work school. I think in these ways we're going to have to re-define work. I think in addition it means that we are going to have to have some democratic planning in the society in order to know what to prepare people for as

the machines take over various areas, and that means some basic re-assumptions. One is the assumption that if the private sector of the economy is not capable of keeping people at work with dignity, then the public sector must come in and play a larger role. I think this also means that we must evolve a society of Negroes and other poor people are to be healthy people, where the society says to these people, we know you do not have education, we know you cannot get certain types of work, but nevertheless you must be healthy, therefore, the state sees to it that anyone who cannot afford it has medical care. And I think that this argument is to me an integral part of - and here's the strange thing in this whole struggle that the Negroes are now making for justice. But I reject the idea of working for justice for Negroes ~~as~~ being impractical as well as immoral, if one does that alone. One now has to see it as a problem of attempting to deal with the inconsistencies and the wrong assumptions in the entire society.

RPW: Let me ask you two questions around that point that cross my mind. One is, is this the question of numbers in employment, not quotas but simply more or less empirically arrived at count, you see - it's not, say, a Negro quota equals such a percent, but just a question of visible numbers, you see, in the industry - such a thing as you have in Atlanta - this is the boycott in Atlanta -

putting eighteen people in various grades
- each in various grades. This is where truck
driver, say. That is not - the transitional technique. Does that

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strike you as sense or not?

BR: Well, I am in favor of attempting to do everything at this moment for upgrading and finding work for Negroes. But in the long run I do not believe that the quota answer is an answer, precisely because of the fact that up to forty thousand people out of jobs. Now, under these circumstances, given the attitudes of many people toward Negroes, I think what you will do is get a resistance to this because a man, regardless of what color he is, if he doesn't have a job tends to fight anybody to get it before the other fellow. So that the answer lies in Negroes and whites, North and South, pulling together around the slogan of full employment now for all. Otherwise I think that we're going to have the kind of thing we have in Newark, New Jersey, where Negroes and whites are fighting over the few jobs that are available.

RPW: That's what labor - the Newark trouble you think?

BR: Yes.

RPW: Job trouble?

BR: Yes. I think you have fifty-two percent of the city Negro, and almost three times as many Negroes unemployed as whites. But the white man who is employed is extremely nervous about any philosophy that tends to suggest somehow or other that maybe he's dispensable, and he's got enough sense to know that something basic must be done. And I think that the whole history of this country of the economic situation getting bad and tension between Negroes and whites simultaneously getting bad, or in good times you have less tension indicates

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to me that there must be a broad outlook where we are insuring everybody who will work jobs.

RPW: Now there's another question - the second one I had in mind - around that point. This is in Dr. King's last book, his program for the disadvantaged, you see. Now a part of that is justified on the same grounds you take. This is a _____ of all people who are disadvantaged. Then he moves over to a justification for the Negro's participation on the ground of back wages, you see - slavery. How do you approach that special justification?

BR: Well, Dr. King is a minister, and if one wants to analyze the problem morally there is no one who would not say that the Negroes have been so badly treated that they deserve some special consideration. But if one attempts to put this into operation at this period, then let us look at the figures. Special treatment can come to Negroes who have been prepared for this special treatment. That is, to Negroes who have had college educations. That is less than three percent of the Negroes in the country. The big problem is that the ninety-seven percent cannot be dealt with in this manner, and to me they are the more important because the educated can always more easily fend for themselves. What do you do about the quarter of a million people who are being run off farms in the South, who have an average of four children, whose average age is 45, who have an average reading rate of third grade? No makeshift less than finding full employment in a period of automation and a redefinition of what work is can accommodate these people. And here I'd like to give you

another illustration of the kind of thing I mean. In New York City teachers find it difficult to teach because they're baby-sitters, they're policeman, they take children to lunch, they do a thousand things. Now, I would like to see someone called an assistant teacher. She would be poor Irish women, poor Negroes, poor certain type people who have all their lives taken care of the children of the rich and the powerful. They are said to have no skills but they have one of the world's most profound skills, the skill of loving and being able to deal with children. If in New York City alone we took several thousands of these women, elevated them to assistant teachers, gave them \$4,000 a year, and let them do the housekeeping at the schools, reduce the process and let the teachers teach them to read and write and not to have to take three sessions of children to the toilet, and not to have to serve lunch to three groups of children. I think that, while I talk about fundamental change, there are many many things which could be done now that would be extremely helpful toward putting people back to work if we were prepared to redefine work and open things up. Another illustration is that in Harlem there are great numbers of young boys who because they have not been able to get work have become skilled at taking care of the younger children in the family and skilled at teaching these children to play sports and other things. Why do not we open up more parks for hundreds and hundreds of these boys to work. Or why does New York City not do something about Central Park, which when I came to New York was a beautiful park? We could put to work five hundred young

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men if only at \$50 a week or \$40, and really making it livable and beautiful again? So that I am not only for pie in the sky, I am for this moment certain kinds of economic changes coming about. For example, I am for the fact - I mean, I believe social security should not be given to a man for thirteen or twenty-six weeks, but be given to him until he finds work, and that society helps him find work in these periods between work. Secondly, I believe that we must reduce the work week and the work year. I think that when you give people more leisure, the one thing automation cannot touch is the service of humans to humans, and that we ought to explore this because of the tremendous human need. I think in New York City alone we could stand maybe a hundred small clinics where people could come for help in psychiatric problems which they have. And we could put people to work in running these. In the housing projects in New York City, it's ridiculous that bureaucrats run these. There are men and women unemployed in those houses. They should be set up on a cooperative basis where they make their own decisions democratically and run them, so that - that would be something -

RPW: Let me go back to Dr. King for one more question, for a moment - if you are justifying the program on the ground of back wages, doesn't this strike a very invidious distinction between, say, the Negroes on such a program and the people who cannot say that they were - answered to the word "slave"? (talking together) false track, really?

BR: Yes, this is one of the reasons I reject this tack - that I do not think it is an especially constructive track. Furthermore, I would be - say that there are a number of other people, as individuals, white, who may in their own way have been as greatly mistreated. I remember on my block there was a red headed boy and all of us used to chase him, black and white, and call him Reddy. And we just ran him out of our society. Now, he's been penalized too. But I don't think that ever a social movement can be based on past sins. It has to be based on the collective needs of people at this time, regardless of color, creed, race.

RPW: That's what I was getting at. (talking together)

BR: Dr. King knows this is my view because I have said this to him after reading that section of his book.

RPW: Yes, well I'm sure he knows this is not universally accepted position. I think he slipped on that. I think he wouldn't stand on it if he had thought it through. I don't think he thought it through really.

BR: I dare say perhaps he didn't.

RPW: I'm a great admirer of his but I don't think he thought that through. Nobody thinks everything through.

BR: That's right.

RPW: Let me turn to the riots this summer, which you know a great deal about and I know were deeply involved in emotionally. (interruption). We were talking about the riots. Now, of course there are many questions around and about the riots. Let's take one question -

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we know these things are socially conditioned - the participants are conditioned by society in a certain way. Now, what do we make of that fact? Is that - recognizing that, then where do other responsibilities come in, on the part of police, on the part of the City Fathers, on the part of the Negroes in influence - taking these various factors, you relate them to the fact that social condition -

BR: Well, I think, sir, it's most important to understand the three stages of a riot first. Number one, I think that the rioting was the result of pent-up frustration, pent-up frustration that grew from the economic conditions, the absence of hope, and the confusion that one finds in ghettos, the inability to sleep at nights in the summer because you sleep in shifts, and the inability to sleep because the trash is not collected at proper hours, and garbage collectors come in the middle of the night - all kinds of filthy dirt in addition to the conditions outside. Now, there was a second stage, and that is the stage that all criminal elements use. When they see something going on, regardless of what caused it, they then move in because they're criminals, black criminals or white criminals, whatever it happens to be. The third stage is the stage where certain political groups for their own objectives try to keep the situation stirred up. Now I would say, therefore, if one goes back to stage number one, the responsibility on the part of black and white people of good will is as rapidly as possible to relieve these frustrations by working for jobs, for decent housing, and for quality

educated schools. If one comes to point number two, one is then in a very difficult position in regard to police. They have to maintain some degree of law and order. The problem that I think made a number of people in Harlem angry, was the police used force far beyond that which was necessary. Now, I don't think the police did this because they got into a back room and said, let's be nasty. I think it is because they are afraid of the ghetto, they are frightened men and they do what all men do when frightened, behave as if the truth were not true. This is the ticklish part. I think what we were trying to get the police to do in New York was to recognize that until we can deal with these fundamental questions, no matter how well they behave it is never good enough, and that if they had set up a board it could review cases of so-called brutality, and if we had some responsible Negro on that board that people knew, this would be a bow and would make this kind of thing less possible. So far as the third stage is concerned, where the political folks come in to make hay, as when they attempted the progressive labor people for their own means to keep a parade going on Lenox Avenue when they knew there would be problems, that has to be dealt with as we attempted to deal with it, by the Negro community's intelligent leadership itself. It was not the police put an end to this, it was those of us who went into the streets and got people off the streets, who organized the youth to keep them off the streets to make that parade absolutely impossible to take place. They had finally thirty people. So I - this is the opening statement I would -

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RPW: Yes. Let me raise the question about Philadelphia, where there was a police board of review. Now, was that an effective board, or was that just not enough?

BR: Well, I know Clarence Pickett, who is the former head of the American Friends Service Committee, who was the chairman of that board, and I had quite a long talk with him afterwards and I would trust his judgment. His judgment was that if it had not been for the police review board, the likelihood is that they would have had trouble earlier and to a greater degree, that it was in fact helpful. But you will note that I said earlier, even if police behaved ideally there would be frustrations. You must think of the police as jailers, that is to say, if you have a ghetto, which is like a cell, which people are to be kept in, they end up looking upon the police because he maintains order there, as the man who is finally responsible for keeping them there. Furthermore, he's the white man they see every day, or the Negro man they see taking orders from a white superior, and therefore the Negro police becomes an Uncle Tom. Now, I don't agree to all this, but I am trying to get you to feel what people feel.

RPW: Let me ask you this - Negro police were the first targets of the riot in Philadelphia I understand from the papers.

BR: This may be - I -

RPW: - men following their natural course of duty as far as I know violence.

BR: Well, they may be - I don't know the Philadelphia story - I've

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not studied it. I can say two things. I do know Negro policemen in New York who are amongst the most brutal police, and I think that here again an explanation is needed. The Negro has all of his life been told whatever field he goes into he's got to be better at it than anybody else. Therefore the Negro policeman is out to do two things, to prove he's a good policeman, which given the nature of our society and vengeance toward criminals, etc., very often means mistreatment, and secondly, he is trying to prove to the people downtown that he is not being soft because they are Negro like himself. So I can well understand this, being - the place in the given situation.

RPW: Now, what about the relation between say the - we'll say white riots, like they had in New Hampshire, like the English riots, of - quotes - unoppressed young people,

what kind of psychological ground do they have in common between the - if any - between that and the Harlem, Rochester, Philadelphia riots? How much is a world question and non-racial question?

BR: Muirdahl once pointed out in the American Dilemma that wherever you find Negroes of whatever class they are exaggerated Americans, they will be more of that in their effort to become a part. I think we're talking about two different things that have a common root. I would call the poverty in Harlem physical poverty which comes from the absence of plenty. There is another form of violence which comes from the poverty of plenty. Now at the root of both of these is the same thing, the feeling on the part of young

people that they don't belong, they don't know what their place in society is, that somehow they are a sub-class which has nowhere to go, and there is a great deal of frustration among white youngsters, even rich ones, children who tear up a house in Long Island and who take dope in Westchester, and it springs from the basic fact that we don't have hope, we don't have a future, we don't know who we are. And I think there is less excuse for their doing that, because in addition to everything that they've got, the Negro also has physical discomfort - it's a plus matter. But I think it springs mainly from the same thing.

RPW: You tie both the disorder among the privileged white young and the underprivileged Negro young to a common ground in a lack of direction and a lack of a direct sense of identity, is that right?

BR: Yes, sir.

RPW: Both these counts?

BR: And I use the term "poverty of plenty" advisedly.

RPW: It's a good term. How much of the general feeling of a crisis of identity do you accept in terms of the Negro movement or the Negro revolution? How do you interpret it?

BR: I interpret it quite seriously from my experience with great numbers of young people who are forced to say, who am I, black man? out of the conditions that they face. But who would have to ask that question if they weren't white in this society? Now therefore the thing which I think is wrong is not the posing of the question but the answer.

(end of tape)