

The Civil-Rights Movement and the American Establishment

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TWO DAYS before the New Year began, James Farmer, national director of CORE, set out on a journey to nine African countries. The *New York Times* gave an extended report of the press conference which he held before his departure. Farmer described his trip as a "fact-finding tour" and added that his "mission" was neither as an anti-American nor as an apologist. It "would be foolish to hide the fact that we have problems here." Africans know that. However, "in some cases their picture is not entirely accurate."

Accordingly, Farmer said, he will not hide the gains that have been achieved in civil rights here, including the passage of the Civil Rights Law, "the massive desegregation of public places in the South" and the war on poverty. He said his tour will have four major purposes: 1) to foster a close liaison between the civil-rights movement and the new African nations; 2) to interpret to Africans what is happening here; 3) later interpret to Americans what is happening in Africa and 4) to seek to have "some impact" on United States foreign policy in Africa.

Another major contribution Farmer felt he could make

was in pointing out to Africans that white Americans have joined in the civil-rights movement. He also planned to offer the services of trained Negro specialists in a "type of Peace Corps operation," but stressed that no American Negro would be sent unless a request was made by the African nations.

The *Times* further reported that James Farmer stressed his role as a "free agent" representing the American Negro Leadership Conference on Africa, which was established a year or so ago by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the Urban League, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the National Council of Negro Women and CORE. However, he also stated that on his return he would present a report with recommendations to President Johnson and the State Department.

Shortly before this story came to my attention two pronouncements by other figures associated with the civil-rights struggle came to my notice. One appeared in a *New York Times* account of a meeting in Harlem addressed by Malcolm X, one of the black nationalist leaders. Earlier this year he had written from Mecca,

Arabia, to a friend here that he had renounced black racism and had embraced the brotherhood of man but "his words yesterday bristled with militancy." Specifically, Malcolm X told his audience of several hundred, a third of them white, that "we need a Mau Mau" to win freedom and equality for Negroes in the United States. The Mau Mau, he declared, were "the greatest African freedom fighters" and would hold an important place in history.

He went on to accuse President Johnson, Vice President-elect Hubert Humphrey and Mayor Wagner of "playing the same game as the Southern crackers." Having in mind, perhaps, his earlier communication from Mecca he stated:

I'm for anybody who is for freedom, justice and equality. I'm against anybody who tells black people to be non-violent while nobody is telling white people to be non-violent. . . . A black man has the right to do whatever is necessary to get his freedom. We will never get it by nonviolence. . . . Let the Klan know we can do it, tit for tat, tit for tat. We have brothers who are able, equipped and ready to do that.

The other utterance appeared in a report by Jack Newfield in the *Village Voice* (New York) of an interview he had with Le Roi Jones, the young Negro playwright, poet and critic. Jones states his philosophy and orientation in the following terms:

My ideas revolve around the rotting and destruction of America, so I can't really expect anyone who is part of that to accept my ideas. But 90 per cent of the world knows they are true. That's what counts. They know the West is done. . . . America is the West because it owns the West. America is the source of Western culture . . . a culture whose time has come and which is rotting at the roots.

The theme of one of Jones' plays, "The Slave," is that Western culture is coming down during a war between blacks and whites. So he told Newfield:

It is all a struggle between good, useful life forces and those which are ugly and exploitive. That it shapes up as black against white is the way it is: it's not my doing. . . . Guerrilla warfare by blacks is inevitable in the North and the South. History has neutralized the West. You can't use nuclear weapons against us when we kill a few cops. The same goes for the South. Even S.N.C.C. (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee) doesn't realize this because they are just a bunch of middle-class vigilantes. Their middle-class allegiance and values may be unconscious, but they lead S.N.C.C. to value America's existence, and there is no way of saving America. . . . Every black is a potential revolutionist. There are a lot of Tshombes—black traitors—but no matter what kind of fool the middle-class Negro is, he knows he is black.

These contrasting statements by Farmer, Malcolm X and Jones provide a useful starting point for an analysis of the civil-rights movement and its problems. (I hope it will be clear that I am dealing with ideas and program and not with personalities.) Though CORE and S.N.C.C. are not thick-and-thin supporters of the

Democratic party under Johnson's leadership, the tie between the Johnson Administration and the civil-rights movement, except for its black nationalist and allied sections, comes out clearly in James Farmer's "mission" and his observations in connection with it. The very fact that he made a point of saying that he was going as a "free agent" and not as an "apologist" for the United States or the administration underscores the other parts of his statement in which identification with the "cause" of America and with the Administration is positively presented.

There can be no mistaking the intention to do a service to the United States and the Administration in connection with the current power struggle over Africa in Farmer's remark that twenty million American Negroes constitute a "great reservoir of goodwill" and could be used with greater effectiveness in various diplomatic posts in African countries. The same applies to the idea of offering new nations the services of trained American Negroes in a type of Peace Corps operation. It was not necessary for Farmer, after all this, to say that on his return he would present a report with recommendations to the President and the State Department, but his having said it serves to nail down the political character of his mission and indicates the extent to which the civil-rights movement, except for its left and fringe elements, is tied in with the current American régime and in no small measure its tool.

The Johnson Outlook

Let us take a brief look at the Johnson régime. James Reston in his column in the New Year's Day issue of the *New York Times* stated that the "President believes that the major conflicting forces in the nation have reached a level of maturity that reduces the friction between them and opens up the prospect of greater national unity." He goes on to list several fields in which the President assumes this to be the case. 1) Acceptance of the theory that rich and poor stand to gain by a faster expanding economy rather than "merely taxing the rich to help the poor." 2) Labor and management agree they have more to gain by increasing production, wages and profits than "in fighting one another for the more limited benefits of a sluggish economy." 3) There is a wider acceptance of the need to work toward equality between the races and between urban and rural sections of the population. 4) There is a new spirit of religious tolerance here and in the Western world generally. 5) In the foreign field Johnson believes the rising power of nuclear weapons has brought about a "new realization of the necessity of cooperation at least in limited fields and for limited ends." Both the United States and the Soviet Union, for example, have a common interest in arms control and in limiting the spread of nuclear weapons.

When nowadays the question is raised as to how this "progress" can be maintained and eventually lead to more radical measures to meet the profound changes taking place in the world—how something in accord with the "Triple Revolution" might be achieved—the

common answer is that we must look to a "coalition" of forces in which the labor and civil-rights movements will be joined by intellectuals and "progressive elements" generally. For the present the tendency among those holding this point of view is to contend that the Democratic Party is the instrumentality to work through. The labor movement, AFL-CIO, has operated for some years on that basis, but, for obvious reasons, only in the years since 1954 has the civil-rights movement been undergoing a development comparable to that which the labor movement experienced from 1932 to 1941.

In the case of both the labor and civil-rights movements, identification with the contemporary American régime takes place in an economy which has been expanding rapidly for some years and, as the familiar phrase goes, in an affluent society. It would be unusual if those who benefit from present conditions—and this now includes a considerable number of Negroes—did not tend to think well of the régime under which they prosper and were not disposed to serve it in various ways and to look to it for further benefits. Recent advances in the struggle against racial discrimination, such as the 1954 Supreme Court decision and the 1964 Civil Rights Law, have accentuated the tendency.

When this has been said, however, it would seem elementary for all sections of the civil-rights movement to keep in mind that until recently the political machinery of the country, and not least the Democratic Party, worked against the Negro people and in fact constituted the instrumentality by which they were kept in a state of servitude and humiliation. Their determination to tolerate these conditions no longer and to disregard laws which fettered and debased them was responsible for the advances which have been made. While from one point of view these advances have been considerable, a calm survey of the situation will certainly not lead to a verdict that justice and equality for the Negro people have been substantially achieved. On the contrary, there is still a long way to go. Accordingly, it is not a time to abandon genuine militancy or in any sense to yield to the comfortable notion that Washington will now take charge of the campaign.

The Era of Post-Revolution

Young Thomas Hayden, one of the leaders of Students for a Democratic Society, in the November 1964 issue of *Fellowship* magazine has furnished a profound description of American society today. "Dissent and protest," he points out, "exist either within a framework of accepting the mainstream institutions, or they are relegated to isolation or the underworld society. This grim picture is of an encroaching trend. . . . To the extent that trend is transformed into dominant reality, the United States will be advancing into a qualitatively new phase of history: the phase of *post-revolution*." Recent developments, he continues, "at least in capitalist society . . . have tended to flatten out class conflicts and other contradictions typically expected to foster

polarization and change. What has developed is a very complex corporate state in which all major organizations are openly or tacitly coordinated in support, extension and defense of the interests of the largest institutions: the private, state-supported corporations. The debates which take place in this 'corporate state' are *not* between conscious opposites, but rather between proponents of more or less welfare. . . . Above all, the real clue to the corporate state lies in its ability to undercut or isolate all positions of potential revolt."

Ponder this description of the contemporary politico-economic régime in the United States, the soundness of which will hardly be questioned by informed and thoughtful observers. Then place beside it President Johnson's evaluation that there are no "irreconcilable conflicts in the United States" and James Reston's description of the President's guiding principle "that the major conflicting forces within the nation have reached a level of maturity that reduces the friction between them and opens up the prospect of greater national unity." It is surely obvious that the President regards as "mature" the society which Hayden describes, welcomes the fact that debate is not over conscious alternatives and believes that the existing politico-economic régime can be the instrument to achieve "the great society."

Even James Reston points out that there are "honest men pessimistic about the capacity of this country" to deal with the problems of automation, for example, and who differ with the President's assumptions. Other are better able than I am to deal with specific questions such as the adequacy of the proposals for "war on poverty," urban slums, and housing. But it would seem to me elementary that instead of identifying with the Establishment, representatives of the Negro people should regard it as their appropriate function to make radical inquiries into these questions and to use the power they and their people command, when in motion, to press for fundamental solutions. The debate about "more or less welfare," however it is decided, is not likely to result in meeting the problems of Negro workers and the youth of the slums.

America's Role in the World

Le Roi Jones, in the interview to which we have referred, declares unequivocally: "My ideas revolve around the rotting and destruction of America." He sets forth the view that Western culture is coming down in a war between blacks and whites and "does not hide the fact this is his vision of how it will really happen."

There are forms of expression used by Jones which seem to me open to question, but his basic view about America's role in the world today, should be seriously considered, and comes nearer, in my opinion, to the realities of the present world situation than the point of view which prevails among Americans, including probably most Negro Americans.

Ninety per cent of the world, Jones told Newfield, knows that the West and America are done. This is probably

an exaggeration (though if by "know" you mean what people "feel in their bones" and if you take account of the comparative population figures for the non-white and non-Western peoples and the rest of the world, it may not be a gross exaggeration at that). Patently the Western colonial powers have had to retreat and grant political independence to their former colonies. This has not as yet meant full economic independence, as the current struggles in the Congo and elsewhere testify. But informed people are pretty well aware of which way the tide is running.

Now the role which the United States is playing is essentially that of trying in somewhat altered form to maintain Western economic, political and military hegemony in Asia, Africa and Latin America. The United States conceives of itself as engaged in a global struggle to contain Communist power, primarily Russian in the past, primarily Chinese now. But under the circumstances, as a very rich and powerful nation, the United States is constantly in the position of trying to prevent, or at the least to push the brakes down heavily on revolutionary movements aiming at national independence and radical socioeconomic change in the non-Western world. It is, so to speak, seeking to enforce a Monroe Doctrine turned upside down. For the Monroe Doctrine in its inception told European powers to keep out of the Western hemisphere, among other reasons because other peoples in this hemisphere had the same right to independence from foreign powers that the United States had achieved in its Revolutionary War. Today the United States represents established power and the *status quo*. Communist China may be said to be insisting that the United States keep out of Asia and not seek to prevent or control revolutionary movements there. The war in South Vietnam, which incidentally the United States is not winning, furnishes a vivid symbol of the accuracy of what we are saying.

Two points need to be stressed in passing in order that Le Roi Jones' viewpoint may be fully understood, as well as the influence it is bound to command in most of the rest of the world, if not in this country. The first is the disparity, becoming greater rather than less, between the standard of living in the highly developed Western nations and the underdeveloped parts of the world where the non-white peoples live. Because of its preoccupation with the power struggle, the arms race and the economic interest of its corporations (and despite its contributions of economic as distinct from military aid) the United States is doing nothing substantial to bridge that gulf. But that disparity will not be permitted to last and the advantaged nations are bound to be on the losing end of the struggle that will be waged to wipe it out.

Experience of Humiliation

The second point that must be stressed has to do with racial attitudes. To Negroes and other Americans committed to racial justice and equality, Mississippi is today a symbol of evil, injustice, terrorism and shame. What people like Le Roi Jones are underlining is that

Mississippi represents on a small scale what has obtained on a vast scale for several centuries in other parts of the world. In Asia and Africa white men have proclaimed and lived the doctrine of white supremacy and have humiliated the non-white peoples. I sometimes think that the gulf between the peoples who have experienced humiliation as a people and those who have not is the deepest and most significant we have to face and that contemplation of it and awareness of its meaning is the chief essential for dealing with contemporary problems. When one undertakes to do that, one comes to see that most people are on one side of that gulf and that almost alone, perhaps, on the other side are the white Americans. They could shove other people off the sidewalk in their own country and virtually anywhere else in the world; no one could shove them off the sidewalk—until recently. It is this, I take it, that Le Roi Jones is talking about when he speaks of "a struggle between good, useful life forces and those which are ugly and exploitive," and when he adds, "that it shapes up as black against white is the way it is; it's not my doing." (I assume he would include yellow and brown as well as black among non-whites.)

Criticism of "Black Nationalism"

It is probably time for me to observe that I am not becoming an apologist for "the black nationalist" or some similar position. Briefly, many spokesmen for this position seem not to regard white people as human beings. This is racism. Furthermore, though in many cases they may not intend to do so, many spokesmen for this position in effect line up on the anti-American rather than the pro-humanity side in the power struggle and the arms race. Anti-Washington means for them pro-Moscow or pro-Peking and not anti-war and pro-mankind. It is hardly necessary to say that their advocacy of violence and guerilla warfare is a position which I do not accept. As I have suggested in earlier articles, I think that apart from the general case for nonviolence there are special reasons why the advocacy of violence in the United States, at least at this juncture, is adventurist rather than revolutionary.

But this is not what in my opinion needs most to be said when we are considering the program and strategy of the civil-rights movement in the United States and especially that of the section of it which is committed to nonviolence. I think it is a mistake for the Urban League, N.A.A.C.P., S.C.L.C., CORE and S.N.C.C. not to take seriously certain criticisms by the black nationalists and similar groups relating to the domestic situation, such as their allegation about the phony—"token"—character of what has so far been achieved in the integration field, their questioning of the role of the Kennedys, Johnson, Wagner, their allegations about the middle-class character of most of the civil-rights movement. Most important in my view, however, men like Roy Wilkins, Whitney Young, Martin Luther King, Jr., James Farmer, Bayard Rustin, and the S.N.C.C. leaders, should at this time contemplate what their attitude is toward the United States as a world

power, toward the role it is playing in Vietnam, the Congo, and Cuba.

It seems to me it cannot be successfully contested that the role of the United States in the South Vietnam war is stupid, politically inept, wicked. The *New York Times* daily provides the evidence. It seems to me extremely difficult, to put it conservatively, to contest successfully what I have been saying about the general role of the United States in relation to the popular movements of our age, the power struggle, the obscene build-up of nuclear weapons. This should have the attention especially of those in the civil-rights movement and elsewhere who profess commitment to non-violence. How can the leaders of a movement which is based on nonviolence associate themselves, tacitly or openly, with the nuclear build-up of this Administration or the war in South Vietnam? Are we truly moving toward a peaceful world and a nonviolent society when we ignore these aspects of national life while occupied with the violence in Mississippi, Alabama and New York? Are these really separate matters so that a movement can attend to one and ignore the other?

There is, of course, the general consideration that if the nations continue on their present course the nuclear catastrophe will overtake us. And what will racial equality mean for Negroes in a world living in fear and doomed to annihilation? But there is another way to state the issue in the context of this article. The civil-rights movement seeks the end of white domination in this country. Perhaps it should be said that it remains to be seen whether this is indeed the goal of the movement or whether it will rest satisfied with improving the status of a section of the Negro people in a society which continues to be based on the pattern of domination-submission. But let us for present purposes accept what the movement says about its goal. Then it cannot consistently fail to back the struggle for that goal on the part of non-white people anywhere. In other words, the civil-rights movement for Freedom Now has to be for *liberation* of subjugated and humiliated people everywhere, or carry a cancer in its own body. To be for liberation means that you cannot side with any force that obstructs liberation, certainly you cannot give support to that force. But the role of the United States in the world today is largely that of obstruction. If the civil-rights movement does not dissociate itself from that role and support the liberation movements it will in the end stultify itself. Obviously this presents a grave problem for the civil-rights movement: how can it be involved in the Johnson régime and look to it for aid in the struggle here at home to the extent that it does, and at the same time dissociate itself from the role of that régime in Asia, Africa and Latin America?

James Farmer makes a tour of nine African nations to "interpret" the United States to them. One might ask whether this means telling them that "massive strides" have been taken though we still have "problems." Presumably Le Roi Jones and Malcolm X would dwell on

the fact that this is the country where for nearly a hundred years after the Emancipation Proclamation the Negro was kept in subjection and humiliated, would dwell on "token" integration, etc. Who would be the true "interpreter"? Moreover, what will be Farmer's "interpretation" of the American role in South Vietnam? What can it be in his report to the President and the State Department?

There is no reference in the *New York Times* report to nonviolence as one of the themes Farmer was to expound. It is probably safe to conjecture that it was not stressed by him at the press conference. In any case, it is difficult for anyone to talk nonviolence to black Africans today. How shall it be done at all by anyone who is not clearly dissociated from a régime which has equipment to wipe out the human race several times over and which is waging a "dirty" war in South Vietnam?

Nonviolence Today

Some will be thinking that the United States has no alternative until the Russians and Chinese are ready for disarmament. In no sense do I whitewash the Moscow and Peking régimes in these matters: they are not pacifistic. But it needs to be said over and over again in these days, that one of the crucial obstacles to peace in the world is American self-righteousness, our feeling that we have never sought anything but peace, that our invention and building of a nuclear arsenal was in the interest of peace, and that it is always the "others" who are the disturbers, aggressors and troublemakers, no matter how many miles away from home we may be. The main point is that so long as nations generally accept the pattern of power and war, things will go on as they have. And this will mean that the West, including the United States will not be able to dominate anymore; its day is over. It will be pushed back. The vast impoverished masses will demand food and dignity. In one way or another they will sweep aside those who stand in their way, unless indeed the nuclear-armed nations play the role of Samson and take the whole house of mankind down with them. The new nations will continue to turn for aid to one or the other Communist régime. In the United States, the civil-rights movement will have to reckon with the Le Roi Joneses, James T. Killens and Malcolms.

That is why we have to embrace nonviolence now. But this means *true* nonviolence, which is the opposite of passivity. It also precludes rejecting violence in, let us say, the racial struggle at home and supporting or acquiescing in the unlimited violence of a national nuclear military establishment. It means seeking to find ways in which oppressed people may be helped to liberate themselves nonviolently, which necessarily requires withdrawal of support from the violence of one's own country which is an instrument of oppression. These, I submit, are questions which those of us who profess nonviolence, including the leaders of the civil-rights movement, have now to wrestle with and that will involve agony.