

THE “TWO-NESS” OF THE MOVEMENT:
JAMES FARMER, NONVIOLENCE,
AND BLACK NATIONALISM

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This essay examines the evolving racial and pacifist politics of civil rights leader James Farmer in order to challenge the tendency within civil rights scholarship to dichotomize the movement between nonviolence and violence, and between interracialism and Black Power.

In 1942 pacifists active in the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR) founded the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), an organization committed to using nonviolent direct action to combat racial discrimination and segregation. The principles that guided CORE in its early years were interracialism and Gandhian nonviolence, both of which would be challenged by a new generation of activists in the mid-1960s. Indeed, by 1966, few whites would remain in CORE, and the organization's nonviolent clause would be repealed.

The dominant interpretation of CORE's transition from interracialism and nonviolence to Black Power has been one of declension.¹ Certainly CORE was in decline by the late 1960s; its morale was low and membership had dropped dramatically. Yet this interpretation implies that the rise of black nationalism largely was responsible for the organization's decline and thus obscures the limitations of nonviolent direct action as a strategy, particularly after the passage of federal legislation mandating desegregation and the protection of black voting rights. Indeed, recent scholarship has shown that although membership in organizations like CORE may have declined after 1965, the black freedom movement remained dynamic through the early 1970s, as activists turned to local politics and community organizing.² Moreover, if a different formula for analyzing CORE is used, one that measures subjective experience rather than objective categories like membership rolls, the narrative of CORE's decline becomes more complex. The impact of the Black Power movement on black identity and sense of self

was immense—the fact that these psychological achievements are difficult to quantify makes them no less significant.

This paper focuses on African American pacifist James Farmer as a way of exploring why many African American activists were unwilling to dismiss Black Power out of hand. A founder of CORE and the organization's national director from 1961–1965, Farmer had been sharply critical of black nationalism as a young man. Starting in the early 1960s, however, he began to reassess it. Although he continued to advocate interracial alliances and strategic nonviolence, he now contended that some form of nationalism was “necessary, even healthy,” as he put it in a 1965 book titled *Freedom—When?*. The way in which Farmer straddled positions, usually seen as incompatible, contributes to recent historiography that challenges the tendency in civil rights scholarship to bifurcate the movement “between South and North, nonviolence and Black Power militancy, de facto and de jure segregation, and the movement before 1965 and after,” as Jeanne F. Theoharis recently has put it.³

James Farmer was born in Texas on January 12, 1920. His father was the first black Ph.D. in Texas, teaching classics and the Hebrew Bible at Rust College in Mississippi, at Wiley College in Texas, and later at Howard University. Farmer's childhood thus was sheltered and was middle class. Bright and articulate, he entered college at the age of fourteen and quickly became his teachers' favorite student. His cloistered and privileged childhood did not protect him, however, from the trauma of racial discrimination. When he was three-and-a-half years old, he asked his mother to buy him a Coca-Cola from a downtown store, and she explained that they could not enter the store because they were “colored.” The incident was his awakening to the fact that to have dark skin in the United States was to be disadvantaged.⁴

Like most of the pacifists who founded CORE, Farmer traced his interest in social reform and peace to the influence of Social Gospel Christianity. As a seminary student at Howard University, he wrote a master's thesis that distinguished between “priestly” and “prophetic” religion, the former serving to legitimize unequal social relations and the latter posing an egalitarian vision of human equality and brotherhood. Religion thus held out the possibility of providing a basis for “Negro masses” and sympathetic whites to unite in an activist challenge to American racism.⁵

Farmer also became a pacifist while in seminary at Howard. His mentor, the theologian Howard Thurman, introduced him to Gandhi

and his philosophy of *satyagraha*.⁶ During the late 1930s, Farmer pursued his commitment to peace and racial equality as a leader of the Student Christian Movement, through which he became acquainted with other future leaders of CORE, such as George Houser, and became familiar with the FOR, a Christian pacifist organization that hired him as a field secretary in 1941.⁷

Based in Chicago, Farmer was part of a race relations cell that had been organized by Houser, who also had been hired on the staff of FOR. The use of the term *cell* by pacifists reflected the influence of veteran labor activist and former head of the Trotskyist American Workers' Party, A. J. Muste. When Muste assumed leadership of FOR in 1940, he urged pacifists to form themselves into cells, where they would gain the comradeship, courage, and discipline necessary for nonviolently revolutionizing American society.⁸ Muste exercised a formative influence on many of the pacifists who came of age in the 1940s, particularly the young African American Quaker Bayard Rustin, who also would play a major role in early CORE.⁹

The race-relations cell in which Farmer participated was interested particularly in exploring the possibility of using Gandhian nonviolence as a weapon in the struggle for racial equality. While the cell began experimenting with nonviolent direct action by attempting to desegregate a local roller-skating rink, Farmer drafted a memo to Muste, calling on FOR to "direct and supervise" a mass, nonviolent movement against racial segregation and discrimination that he called "Brotherhood Mobilization." According to Farmer's vision, "Brotherhood Mobilization" would begin as a "nucleus" of pacifists under the wing of FOR but then would become an autonomous movement that would include "masses of people, black and white, Jewish and Gentile." Its defining feature would be its willingness to engage in direct action in contrast to the educational and legal approach taken by organizations such as the Urban League and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).¹⁰

Much to Farmer's delight, Muste was so impressed with the memo that he circulated a copy of it to the members of FOR's national council for discussion at the upcoming meeting, which was held in Cincinnati, Ohio, in April 1942. Instead of agreeing to "direct and supervise" the proposed project, the national council authorized Farmer to dedicate his time to building up such a movement, which would function as "an autonomous body composed of persons in or out of the FOR who are actively interested in the proposed movement."¹¹ Soon thereafter, Farmer

and other members of the Chicago race-relations cell formed the first branch of the Congress of Racial Equality. Though only about half of the fifty charter members were pacifists, historians August Meier and Elliot Rudwick have shown that “the role of the pacifist nucleus was critical. In addition to founding the group, pacifists held most of the offices during Chicago CORE’s early years and decisively influenced its philosophy and style.” The same was true of the CORE groups that soon emerged throughout the country. Charter members were usually members of a FOR cell who had been convinced by Farmer, Houser, or Rustin to form a local branch of CORE. As the groups expanded to include nonpacifists, pacifists typically remained the most active members and continued to occupy leadership positions.¹²

The pacifist origins of CORE help explain the organization’s philosophy and practice of nonviolence. Reflecting their backgrounds in evangelical Protestantism, the founders of CORE viewed the conversion of the opponent to be as—if not more—important than changing racist practice. Farmer recalled that early CORE “regarded the sit-in as the successful culmination of a long campaign to reach the heart of the restaurant owner with the truth. What we took to be his conversion was as important as the fact that the restaurant had indeed been desegregated.”¹³ Similarly, Houser, who served as executive secretary of CORE from 1945 through 1954, stressed the importance of conversion and reconciliation through an ongoing process of negotiations and the use of direct action only as a last resort. “A nonviolent campaign cannot be considered a total success unless attitudes are changed in the process of changing policies.”¹⁴

The organization’s emphasis on interracialism was also an expression of the Christian pacifist ideals that motivated its founders. In early 1942, Farmer wrote an article for *Fellowship* magazine in which he stated that the foundation of pacifist philosophy was the “Jewish-Christian faith in the universal community, the world fellowship, the unity of the human family.” This meant not only that ending race discrimination had to become a top priority but also that pacifists had to take an approach that “in no sense smacks of racial chauvinism.”¹⁵ Rustin similarly equated pacifism with interracialism. As he put it in a 1943 letter to his draft board, “Segregation, separation, according to Jesus, is the basis of continuous violence.... That which separates man from his brother is evil and must be resisted.”¹⁶ Rustin suggested that one way for whites to overcome racial separation was to imitate Gandhi and to identify with America’s “untouchables.”¹⁷

This was certainly part of Houser's motivation for founding CORE; as he recalled, "we wanted to challenge anything that separated [people] and any discrimination [against one of us] was ... discrimination against all of us."¹⁸

CORE groups were viewed not only as a means to an end of racial equality, but they also were seen as vehicles for expressing the reality of racial equality. Pacifists like African American Erna Harris frequently warned fellow "direct actionists" not to become so enamored with direct action that they neglected the important work of getting acquainted with other participants in CORE groups.¹⁹ Such fellowship was viewed as an important means of overcoming consciousness of racial difference. Houser recalled an incident that he viewed as one of his personal victories over racial thinking. At one early meeting of the race-relations cell in Chicago, he stated that one of the obstacles to initiating a direct-action campaign was that the group lacked any black members. "And there's Jim Farmer sitting right there, and then we started laughing because we just weren't thinking in terms of race with somebody that we knew so well."²⁰ CORE activists also attempted to practice interracialism in their personal lives. Farmer recalled that Bernice Fischer, a white founder of CORE, took deep pride in her close relationship with him as "a bridge between what was and what should be."²¹ There were also sexual relationships that developed across the "color line." White community-relations director Marv Rich was married to Evelyn, who was black. In 1949, Farmer married Lula Peterson, a white woman.²² These relationships were inherently political acts, not only because of the context of race relations in the United States but also because CORE activists believed that their personal relationships would provide their fellow Americans with a prophetic vision of interracial cooperation.²³

The centrality of interracialism to CORE's identity caused the organization to be initially suspicious of A. Philip Randolph's March on Washington Movement (MOWM). The MOWM began in 1941 when Randolph threatened to lead thousands of African Americans in a march on the nation's capital if the federal government did not address the problem of racial discrimination in wartime industries. Although Randolph called off the march when President Roosevelt established the Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC), the movement continued to function as a way of keeping pressure on the Roosevelt administration. Pacifists worried that the all-black character of the movement was an expression of black nationalism, which they viewed as an obstacle to racial reconciliation. As Farmer put it in a 1944 essay, "The stronger

black nationalism becomes in Negro life in America, the farther we are from a real solution to the problem of color. The basic problem ... is to break down barriers of segregation.... We cannot destroy segregation with a weapon of segregation."²⁴ Eventually, however, excitement at the prospect of a social movement based on Gandhian principles convinced Farmer and other pacifists to support Randolph and the MOWM, and they lent the movement valuable assistance.²⁵

Farmer's position on black nationalism began to change in the 1960s due to his involvement in the civil rights movement. CORE had benefited both financially and organizationally from the Montgomery Bus Boycott; by 1961 it had become one of the most important civil rights organizations in the United States, notable for its profound commitment to Gandhian philosophy and nonviolent direct action. As CORE's fortunes improved, so did Farmer's. In 1961 he became the organization's national director, a position from which he would become one of the movement's most charismatic leaders.

Starting in 1963–1964, many CORE activists began to challenge the tenets of nonviolence and interracialism that had guided the organization from its inception. The ensuing crisis within CORE over its identity and direction reflected a larger crisis within the civil rights movement itself. The reluctance of the federal government to intervene on behalf of black civil rights had led many activists to question the movement's reliance on the conscience of the white liberal establishment to achieve black freedom. Moreover, through their involvement with the black community, activists had discovered that residents often seemed more concerned about their lack of economic and political power than with segregation. Finally, civil rights activists were beginning to recognize the power of culture; the role of freedom songs in sustaining morale, for example, suggested to them the importance of overcoming the psychological heritage of racial oppression. Thus, at the same time that federal legislation mandating desegregation and that voting rights appeared more likely, many civil rights activists had become alienated from liberalism.²⁶

Within CORE, the challenge came from two sides. One side, represented by Rustin and Norman Hill, had come to believe that direct action and the emphasis on integration had reached its apogee. While integration had permitted blacks to sit in classrooms with white students and moved blacks into previously all-white neighborhoods, it had failed to address the socioeconomic factors that created bad schools, unemployment, and ghetto neighborhoods. They argued that CORE

should align with the labor movement and the Democratic Party in an attempt to unite poor and working-class blacks and whites. Such an alliance, they argued, would help counteract the rise of black nationalism among urban African Americans.²⁷

The other side, which tended to be occupied by younger activists, had begun to question Gandhian nonviolence and to assert the right to armed self-defense. These "New Jacobins," as Farmer referred to them, continued to engage in direct action, but not in the spirit of love and truthfulness that had inspired the pacifists who had founded CORE. Moreover, they began to question CORE's interracial ideal, called for the organization to be black-led, and argued that cultivating black pride should become one of the organization's goals.²⁸

On the surface, Farmer appeared to have more in common with Rustin and Hill than the younger militants; like Farmer, they were older activists with roots in pacifism, the labor movement, and the Socialist Party. Farmer's position on the Vietnam War, at least until 1966, resembled those of Rustin and Hill: Although he personally opposed the war, he argued that attention to foreign policy would divert the organization from its civil rights agenda. In fact, it was his influence at CORE's national convention in 1965 that tabled a resolution denouncing the war in Vietnam. In addition, he and President Lyndon Johnson were cultivating a relationship that could have pleased only those advocating an alliance with the Democratic Party.²⁹

But Farmer balked at their proposal that CORE abandon direct action to build a coalition with liberals and labor leaders. In part, Farmer's opposition was related to the fact that he maintained an allegiance, albeit an increasingly tenuous one, to direct action. While he recognized that new strategies were needed to address the "*impersonal* forces of modern economic life," he still viewed demonstrations as an "indispensable" tool for forcing the power structure to pay attention to the plight of African Americans. Demonstrations also offered education in freedom; they "have provided literally millions of Negroes with their first taste of self-determination and political self-expression." To abandon them in an attempt to preclude a white backlash ignored the fact that freedom was "not a prize ... for good behavior. Freedom is earned and learned in struggle...."³⁰ Reflecting this commitment, he refused to join the moratorium on demonstrations called by Martin Luther King, Randolph, Roy Wilkins, and Whitney Young—and supported by Rustin and Hill—to ensure Barry Goldwater's defeat in the 1964 presidential election.³¹

Another reason Farmer was resistant to the proposal put forward by Hill and Rustin was that he had argued consistently that the struggle for racial equality needed to be fought separately from socialist and pacifist organizations. Part of his motivation for forming CORE in the first place was that he believed that a pacifist organization would be unsuccessful in mobilizing a mass movement for racial equality. As he wrote in the memo to Muste requesting permission to set up CORE, "The movement cannot be limited to pacifists but must try to 'mobilize' all persons who want to see an end to racial discrimination in America and are willing to commit themselves to a disciplined nonviolence in working toward that goal."³² In the controversy over CORE's direction that erupted in 1963–1964, Farmer feared that Hill wanted to make CORE a socialist organization and thereby subsume the fight for racial equality under the class struggle. In an interview circa 1969, Farmer recalled that he had always attempted "to keep the organization from becoming a tail to anybody's kite, including my friends' kites. I consider myself a socialist ... used to be a member of the Socialist Party ... fellow traveler for several years after that ... but I would fight to the death an attempt by anybody to make CORE a socialist organization, a Socialist Party front, because I don't think they have all of the answers."³³ Thus, although Farmer agreed that CORE should get involved in formal politics, he insisted that the organization remain independent from political parties.

But the main reason Farmer opposed Rustin and Hill was that, by 1964, his perspective on black nationalism had become more complicated. Where he had once opposed any form of black group identity as "chauvinism," he now argued that CORE's most important task was to combat feelings of inferiority among African Americans by cultivating pride in black history and culture. To those who argued that this constituted racism in reverse, he pointed out that, for most African Americans, black nationalism signified "someone who was aggressively proud of the black community" as opposed to separation or emigration to Africa. Preferring to call this sentiment black "ethnocentrism," he contended that it was no different from the pride Irish or Jewish Americans took in their heritage.³⁴ The United States, he contended, was not a melting pot but was a culturally pluralistic society; black pride was the first step black Americans needed to take in order to become a part of this tradition. As he put it in a 1968 interview, "I see the black man standing on his own feet and coming into a pluralistic culture as a proud partner with other ethnic cultures."³⁵

This shift in Farmer’s perspective grew out of his experiences in the civil rights movement. As CORE’s national director, he had observed the movement evolve from a quest for civil equality into “a source of great pride [that] inspired a renewed search for a black identity.” The move toward cultural nationalism was not, therefore, a sign of the movement’s impoverishment, as Hill and Rustin suggested, but rather was an organic development that reflected the black community’s political coming of age.³⁶ Farmer’s shift in perspective also reflected the influence of Black Muslim Malcolm X, with whom he had debated on several occasions and with whom he had developed a relationship of mutual respect. As he wrote in *Freedom—When?*, Malcolm X had taught him that it was fundamental for blacks to love themselves before they truly could be free: “I was seeing some of the psychological if not political sense of his words,” he wrote. He recalled that, in a conversation that took place in early 1964, the two men had joked that by year’s end Farmer would become a nationalist and Malcolm X would become an integrationist, “and we may well have been right.”³⁷

Cultural nationalism made psychological sense to Farmer because of his own personal journey. Through his involvement in the civil rights movement, he realized that although the pacifist and socialist world in which he spent his young adulthood was intellectually stimulating, it had allowed him only to despise racism on an abstract level. As he put it, “For as long as I can remember I have been dedicated to gaining equality for Negroes, but I know now that, in part, I came to this commitment theoretically....” The intellectual, pacifist, and socialist part of himself had kept him “isolated” from his people and thus had suppressed his anger and indignation at that symbolic, yet bitter, experience of not being able to buy a Coca-Cola as a child because of the color of his skin.

Farmer’s sympathy for the “new mood ebony” within CORE and within the larger movement led him to renounce early CORE’s goal of a color-blind society:

We have found that the cult of color-blindness [is] not only quaintly irrelevant but seriously flawed. For we learned that America couldn’t simply *be* color-blind. It would have to *become* color-blind and it would only *become* color-blind when *we* gave up our color. The white man, who presumably has no color, would have to give up only his prejudices. We would have to give up our identities. Thus, we would usher in the Great Day with an act of complete

self-denial and self-abasement. We would achieve equality by conceding racism's charge: that our skins were an affliction; that our history is one long humiliation; that we are empty of distinctive traditions and any legitimate source of pride. Indeed, we would cease to use the word *we*, for we would concede that there is no "we" which can meaningfully refer to Negroes. And all this we were asked to do, and asked ourselves to do, *at the very moment* when the movement was teaching us to love ourselves, and making the name Negro a name to conjure with.³⁸

Farmer's comments are significant because in suggesting that the ideal of "color-blindness" erased black distinctiveness and culture, he implied that early CORE had been influenced by a level of ethnocentrism. Indeed, the rhetoric of black nationalism allowed Farmer to recognize that inequality and paternalism had characterized relations between blacks and whites even within CORE. Whites, he asserted, must be sensitive to blacks' separatist impulses: "To the depths of their souls, Negroes feel handled, dealt with, ordered about, manipulated—by white men."³⁹

In asserting the importance of affirming black "visibility," Farmer also echoed the distinction Malcolm X drew between segregation and separation, arguing that there was a difference between integration and desegregation. While the former implied "black dispersion and assimilation," the latter referred to the elimination of de facto and de jure segregation, which was essential for African Americans to enjoy real freedom of choice and independence. "*Desegregation and the development of Negro self-pride work side by side. Desegregation makes separation possible.*"⁴⁰

Farmer's critique of integration and color-blindness led to confrontations with those members of CORE, both black and white, who remained wedded to color-blindness as an ideal and integration as a goal. In 1963, Farmer acted to prevent Alan Gartner, a long-standing and respected white CORE member, from running for the national chairmanship. Although he considered Gartner a friend, Farmer reasoned that at this stage in the struggle the movement had to be black-led. As a result of Farmer's intervention, Gartner agreed to step aside, yet others felt that Farmer's position jeopardized CORE's interracial tradition. Farmer recalled, "We argued painfully and tearfully for hours. What of CORE's principles of interracialism and color-blindness? Some accused me of being a black nationalist, though the candidate did not. 'Why can't he run? Is he competent or isn't he?'.... I was personally saddened by the cost of our decision. For, no doubt, we had denied this man

categorically, because of color, and this was not at all like us. Yet I defend the compromise."⁴¹

The differences between Farmer and his pacifist colleagues extended beyond the issue of Black Power. As noted above, the pacifists who founded CORE aimed not only to change racist practices but also to convert oppressors to the truth of racial equality. According to Farmer, the problem with this approach was that it kept the attention on whites rather than blacks. It also took too long. The original CORE "was excessively interpersonal and private. There was not men nor time nor spirit enough to change each lunch-counter-owner's heart, one by one. As we learned when we finally met them, our people did not wish to wait that long, and *out of love for them*, we did not wish them to...." Finally, Farmer rejected the moral basis of nonviolence. As he explained, his experiences with recalcitrant Southern sheriffs and politicians had taught him that "what men feel and believe matters less than what, under various kinds of external pressures, they can be made to *do*."⁴² Significantly, Rustin developed a similar critique of the way in which activists tended to "cast their objectives in a moral framework," as his most recent biographer has put it.⁴³ Yet where Rustin concluded that it was time to move "from protest to politics," Farmer continued to see value in nonviolent direct action, albeit for pragmatic rather than for moral reasons.

Farmer also differed from Rustin in his acceptance of the legitimacy of armed self-defense. Most African Americans in the movement, he reminded the pacifist members of CORE, had adopted nonviolence due to strategic rather than to moral considerations. Moreover, he insisted that "there are particular and extenuating circumstances in which self-defense is justified and even constitutional." He quoted approvingly a speech by Malcolm X in which the minister asserted that the black man had the right to defend himself "whenever and wherever he is being unjustly attacked. If the government thinks I am wrong for saying this, then let the government start doing its job." The "simple fact," Farmer concurred, was that in many places throughout the country "the concept of equal justice and equal protection has broken down ... if it ever existed there to begin with, and the law *is* a mask for white oppression."⁴⁴

Farmer's assertion that blacks had the right and the prerogative to defend themselves when the law was "a mask for white oppression" did not mean that he rejected nonviolence altogether. He still considered it the most valuable tactic for African Americans in their struggle for freedom because "nonviolence is a weapon tested out and proven effective." Moreover, he believed that Malcolm X's doctrine of self-defense

could degenerate easily into an excuse for indiscriminate violence or “a kind of purgative violence” that he found morally reprehensible.⁴⁵

If Farmer was unwilling to jettison nonviolence, he also found fault with other aspects of the nationalist position. He was most critical of nationalists who emphasized separation to the exclusion of desegregation. For Farmer, separation without desegregation was a chimera; African Americans had to have real freedom of choice before separation could become a genuine political alternative. As he put it, “I do not believe [African Americans] can separate truly if the nation does not simultaneously desegregate.” Farmer also criticized nationalists for imposing a unified black identity and politics on what was in reality a diverse African American community. Many African Americans “will choose to integrate,” and “they should be permitted to,” regardless of what certain black intellectuals or leaders thought. Moreover, although he believed the civil rights movement should be black led, he insisted on maintaining the interracial character of the movement: “It is important for Negroes to know white men and for white men to know Negroes,” he wrote in *Freedom—When?*⁴⁶

Finally, Farmer was unwilling to give up on the United States. He believed that there was an alternative American tradition besides one of violence, oppression, and racism. The power of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, he wrote in his memoirs, was that it “not only repudiated the violent machismo of America; it also stirred to awakening another America—the America of Emerson and Thoreau, of the Quakers, of the abolitionists, the America of principle and compassion.”⁴⁷ In a telling exchange with Malcolm X, he argued that the black struggle for equality was a continuation of the Revolutionary War begun in 1776. For Malcolm X, on the other hand, the only existing war was the one between the United States and the Soviet Union. Farmer, in other words, saw himself and other African Americans as very much a part of America’s history and future; he claimed a right to an American political tradition that black separatists rejected.⁴⁸

Farmer viewed the tensions between integrationists and nationalists, between the means-oriented pacifists and the ends-oriented “new Jacobins,” as a manifestation of black “double-consciousness,” which W. E. B. Du Bois identified half a century earlier to explain the contradictions involved in being both black and American.⁴⁹ “There is a two-ness, to use Du Bois’s term, in the movement as there is in the Negro,” Farmer wrote in *Freedom—When?*, “and no synthesis, as far as I can see now, is possible.”⁵⁰ Thus, rather than elide these tensions,

he called on CORE to embrace them. In a proposal he presented to CORE's National Action Council in October 1964, he argued that while integration should remain one of CORE's objectives, the organization's main goal should be to develop the political power of the black community. Similarly, although CORE should not abandon direct action, the organization should engage in grassroots community organizing and local, state, and national politics. Specifically, his plan proposed the formation of three new departments: an economic sector, which would organize producer and consumer cooperatives and encourage small businesses; a cultural action sector, which would strengthen black pride; and a political sector, which would utilize grassroots organizing to politicize the poor. With regard to partisan politics, Farmer argued that CORE should remain independent from all political parties, thus forcing parties and candidates to seek CORE's endorsement.⁵¹

In the struggle between Rustin and Hill on the one hand and those advocating black separatism on the other, Farmer won a short-lived victory. Hill was forced to resign, and CORE's National Action Council voted to approve Farmer's proposal, which remained the organization's platform for the rest of Farmer's tenure (as well as for most of Floyd McKissick's administration from 1966 to 1968). August Meier and Elliott Rudwick have suggested that Farmer oversimplified the differences between the nationalists and integrationists and that Hill's resignation was to the organization's detriment: "As a dedicated integrationist, [Hill] would have been an important influence against the separatist tendencies that were emerging within CORE."⁵² Yet as Meier and Rudwick themselves point out, in practice community organization (which Hill and Rustin also advocated) easily intertwined with nationalist tendencies.⁵³ This suggests that Hill and Rustin's proposal to ally with liberal Democrats was destined to fail because it assumed that the drift toward black nationalism in CORE somehow would disappear. Farmer, by contrast, recognized that cultural expressiveness was there to stay and attempted to channel its more positive manifestations into the organization.

Furthermore, Meier and Rudwick's interpretation assumes that the appeal of black nationalism precluded other positions. Yet Farmer and many other members of CORE found aspects of black nationalism attractive while remaining committed to nonviolence and interracialism. For example, Robert Gore, CORE's assistant community relations director, reacted to a 1962 debate between Rustin and Malcolm X in a way that defies the tendency within civil rights scholarship to dichotomize the movement between nonviolence and violence, between interracialism

and Black Power: "Being a pacifist ... I expected to be 'with' Bayard all the way and 'against' Mr. X completely. My mixed feelings were the result of the discovery that I was applauding more for Malcolm X than I was for Bayard Rustin.... There is no question in my mind but that Bayard presented the saner attitude, but the amazing thing was how eloquently Malcolm X stated the problems which Negroes have confronted for so many years.... I must confess that it did my heart a world of good to sit back and listen to Mr. X list the sins of the white man toward the black man in America."⁵⁴

An appreciation of the movement's fluidity—its "two-ness," as Farmer put it—is not meant to suggest that there were no tensions between integrationists and nationalists, between liberals and radicals. Many local CORE chapters were rife with conflict and looked to the 1965 annual convention to help them resolve these issues. Clarence Funnye, chair of New York CORE, circulated the following statement for discussion at the upcoming convention:

It is my hope that this convention will grapple with what seems to me to be a basic conflict of aims. There are those among us who feel strongly that we must now turn our energies toward rebuilding and strengthening the ghetto to enhance black political power. There are those, on the other hand, who feel that our major thrust must be toward eliminating the ghetto, with all its attendant ills of slums, inadequate schools, high crime rates, poor police protection, inadequate services, and a feeling of hopelessness on the part of inhabitants.

It seems to me that this deals in a very fundamental way with the question of CORE's continuing commitment to working for an integrated society. Can we work toward rebuilding the ghetto, and at the same time press to integrate schools? Can we seek to concentrate black political power, while ignoring the fact that all-white enclaves in our cities provide a breeding ground for bigoted pressure groups and prejudiced politicians? Can we, indeed turn our backs on the principle embodied in the 1954 school decision—that separation in itself is inherently unequal, and leads to a feeling of worthlessness among those who are so separated?⁵⁵

Having eloquently expressed the tensions within CORE, Funnye presented an annual report of his chapter's activities, which seem a model of the direction Farmer believed the organization should take;

the chapter utilized both direct action and community organization to address the economic, political, and cultural factors contributing to black oppression. For example, the chapter's Education Committee provided a tutorial program to inner-city students and organized a boycott to protest school segregation. The Economic Opportunities Committee handled individual complaints against employers, attempted to organize black and Puerto Rican workers, and called boycotts to protest discriminatory hiring practices at several businesses. The Housing Committee formed Tenants' Councils to address infractions and violations of building codes, to fight court cases on behalf of tenants, and to organize demonstrations to protest negligent landlords. New York CORE also initiated a voter registration drive and directed a picket line at Madison Square Garden during Goldwater's "victory" rally.⁵⁶

On the surface, then, Funnye's report represented the possibilities of the organization's new approach. Yet what the report failed to reveal was that black separatist Roy Innis fought Funnye every step of the way and finally rendered him impotent to follow through on his program. By November 1965, five months after the annual convention, Innis had succeeded Funnye as chair, and the remaining whites left the chapter.⁵⁷ Funnye's hope that the upcoming CORE convention would "approach these questions in a spirit of humility" thus can be interpreted as a desperate plea for help.

The theme of the convention was "Northern Ghetto: Awakening Giant," and its stated purpose, as Farmer announced at a news conference, was to formulate a program for community organization and the development of "effective political power." The convention's workshops would explore such questions as "how to make contact with the community;" "how to organize for political action;" and "the power structure: assessing it, researching it, how to deal with it and get results." For the most part, delegates showed enthusiasm for the new approach; the resolutions passed at the convention reflect a commitment to community organizing and political activism. In order to be approved for affiliation, local-action groups now would have to demonstrate involvement in the black community, to organize around that community's "apparent and expressed needs," and to place blacks in leadership positions. Another significant resolution recognized the importance of developing "a sense of racial and ethnic identity" among African Americans and promised that CORE would organize around this principle. Other resolutions called for civilian review boards of police with significant minority representation, massive public works

projects that would provide jobs for unemployed and unskilled workers, and a pledge to fight against discrimination in unions and to organize marginal workers. The convention also voted to abolish the *CORElator*, arguing that the newsletter's emphasis on direct action rather than community organizing no longer accurately reflected CORE.⁵⁸ In all, these resolutions demonstrate that CORE members generally agreed with Farmer that building a political base required a fight on several levels: the cultural, economic, and political.

Yet tensions within the organization over strategy and goals percolated beneath the surface. Although CORE upheld its commitment to nonviolence, there was strong sentiment for a resolution endorsing the legitimacy of retaliatory violence. Indeed, the push to adopt the motion was so intense that it was rejected only when a leader of the Deacons for Defense argued that nonviolence was the appropriate method for demonstrations and promised that the Deacons would provide protection for civil rights activists. The decision to abolish the *CORElator* angered the newsletter's editor, Jim Peck, who accused his opponents of harboring anti-white sentiments. A pacifist who had helped found the organization, Peck believed that the organization should continue to emphasize direct action and had refused to change the newsletter to reflect the organization's new drift. For CORE members like Farmer, however, it chafed that the *CORElator* persisted in showing "black heads getting clobbered," as he put it.⁵⁹ Considering that many activists were impatient with direct action, were frustrated with white violence, and were beginning to emphasize black pride, it is not hard to see why many felt the newsletter was dated.

Friction was further evident in a resolution that called for African Americans to "substantially constitute the leadership" of CORE. Given that African Americans already dominated leadership positions, the resolution can be interpreted as a sign of racial tension. Yet another sign of a split between interracialists and separatists was national chair Floyd McKissick's controversial decision to invite black Muslims to speak at the convention. According to the *New York Times*, when one of them informed the audience that all white men "were created evil," Farmer visibly winced.⁶⁰

Farmer's uneasiness with anti-white rhetoric, Peck's prickly response to the decision to eliminate the *CORElator*, and Innis's hostility toward Funnye all indicate an undercurrent of distrust and uncertainty. And, indeed, the organization would move toward an exclusively black nationalist politics over the course of the late 1960s. When McKissick

replaced Farmer as national director in 1966, CORE officially adopted "Black Power" as its guiding platform, and the nonviolent clause in the organization's constitution was repealed. By 1968, Innis became head of the organization, with the aim of making CORE a "Black Nationalist Organization" with "separation" as its goal.⁶¹ Small, centralized, and all black, CORE in 1968 looked much different than it did in 1942.

On another level, however, the 1965 convention demonstrates a fairly open and frank dialogue about the issues facing CORE, and most delegates undoubtedly returned to their various chapters committed to the multifaceted agenda put forward by Farmer in his proposal to the National Action Council. Indeed, to attribute the decline in membership in the late 1960s solely to the rise of the Black Power sentiment within the movement obscures the possibility that community organizing naturally took a toll on CORE's membership, as activists became involved in local politics and national parties. President Johnson's War on Poverty also attracted some of the best and the brightest of CORE's members.⁶² Furthermore, community organizing was a much less visible form of fighting racism than the confrontational technique of direct action, and this inevitably had an adverse affect on financial contributions.⁶³

More importantly, CORE's decision to deemphasize integration and direct action in favor of "developing the power of the community" was a victory for many of the organization's activists. Their experiences as civil rights workers had exposed the limitations of direct action as a strategy for attacking the complex socioeconomic reasons for poverty and its attendant racism in the United States. Furthermore, the focus of earlier efforts had been on the white community; the intention of the sit-ins and other demonstrations had been to expose the reality of racism to whites and to convert the racist through an appeal to his or her moral conscience. Community organizing and the political mobilization of African Americans who lived in urban ghettos, by contrast, directed CORE's energies toward the black community. For activists like McKissick, "Black Power" meant local control of such institutions as schools, courts, and police; support of black capitalism; and expanded antipoverty programs. If this new emphasis often appeared to whites as a rejection of integration and interracialism, then that was a risk black activists were willing to take.

Farmer recognized that Black Power was a more complicated phenomenon than politicians and the mass media made it out to be. He remained active in CORE until 1976 and throughout the late 1960s and early 1970s continued to insist that there were "few black nationalists

as far as I am concerned” and that the difference between his position and theirs was “minor compared to the areas of agreement.”⁶⁴ These statements reflect neither naïveté nor duplicity; as we have seen, Farmer was quite willing to criticize those who called on African Americans to form their own separate state or to emigrate to Africa. What these statements reveal, then, was Farmer’s sense of the “two-ness” of the movement. “It is incomprehensible to most white Americans,” he wrote in his memoirs, “that deep in the heart of every black adult lives some of Malcolm and some of King, side by side.”⁶⁵

The way in which Farmer embodied positions usually seen as dichotomous demonstrates that Black Power radicalism was not the “‘evil twin’ that wrecked civil rights” but was instead the “direct outgrowth of the creative, ideological, and political tensions during the first phase of civil rights,” as Peniel Joseph has put it recently.⁶⁶ The first phase of the movement emphasized nonviolent direct action and particularly was effective at raising white Americans’ awareness of racial segregation and disenfranchisement in the South. Yet, as Farmer noted, the political mobilization of African Americans also became a source of pride and led to a search for black identity and history. In the process, activists began to question the tenets of nonviolence and interracialism that had guided CORE since its inception. Specifically, they criticized the moral thrust of nonviolence and its tendency to focus outward to the conscience of white Americans rather than inward to the black community. They also criticized the ideal of color-blindness, which seemed to disavow the legitimacy of black distinctiveness and culture. For Farmer, this reevaluation of race and nonviolence did not entail a wholesale abandonment of interracial alliances and nonviolent protest but rather an attempt to redefine them in ways that resonated with new perceptions and needs.

ENDNOTES

* I would like to thank Eric Meeks, Susan Danielson, Robert Divine, Robbie Lieberman, Ian Lekus, and Penny von Eschen for their feedback on earlier versions of this essay.

1. See August Meier and Elliot Rudwick, *CORE: A Study in the Civil Rights Movement, 1942–1968* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975).

2. See, for example, Jeanne F. Theoharis and Komози Woodard, eds., *Freedom North: Black Freedom Struggles outside the South, 1940–1980* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003); Bettye Collier-Thomas and V. P. Franklin,

eds., *Sisters in the Struggle: African American Women in the Civil Rights–Black Power Movement* (New York: New York University Press, 2001); George Lipsitz, *A Life in the Struggle: Ivory Perry and the Culture of Opposition* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1988); and William Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights: Greensboro, North Carolina and the Black Struggle for Equality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980).

3. Theoharis and Woodard, *Freedom North*, 2.

4. James Farmer, *Lay Bare the Heart: An Autobiography of the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Arbor House, 1985), 31.

5. Farmer, "Creed and Prejudice," Box 2R635, James Farmer and Lula Peterson Farmer Papers, Center for American History, Austin, Texas (hereafter cited as Farmer Papers). See also Farmer, *Lay Bare the Heart*, 142.

6. See Farmer, *Lay Bare the Heart*, 142. Thurman met Gandhi in the 1930s, a meeting that had a deep impact on his thinking. See Howard Thurman, *With Head and Heart: The Autobiography of Howard Thurman* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979), 114. For an account of his journey to India, see also Sudarshan Kapur, *Raising Up a Prophet: The African American Encounter with Gandhi* (Delhi, India: Oxford University Press, 1993), 81–83.

7. Farmer, *Lay Bare the Heart*, 129; and George Houser, interview by author, May 7, 2000, Nyack, New York.

8. Muste was a central figure in fostering pacifist militancy in the 1940s and the postwar era. In 1941 he called on pacifists to reach out to "oppressed and minority groups such as Negroes, share-croppers, industrial workers, and help them to develop a nonviolent technique, as Gandhi did in the India National Congress." See A. J. Muste, "The World Task of Pacifism," reprinted in *The Essays of A. J. Muste*, ed. Nat Hentoff. For an in-depth discussion of the process through which American pacifists adopted Gandhian nonviolence, as well as Muste's influence on the pacifist movement, see Leilah Danielson, "'In My Extremity I Turned to Gandhi': American Pacifists, Christianity, and Gandhian Nonviolence, 1915–1941," *Church History: Studies in Christianity and Culture* 72 (June 2003): 361–88.

9. See, for example, John D'Emilio, *Lost Prophet: The Life and Times of Bayard Rustin* (New York: Free Press, 2003).

10. Farmer to Muste, January 8, 1942, series A-3, box 2, folder 1, "Memorandum to A. J. Muste on Provisional Plans for Brotherhood Mobilization," Fellowship of Reconciliation Records, Swarthmore College Peace Collection (hereafter cited as FOR, SCPC).

11. Minutes of National Council Meeting, April 11, 1942, series A-2, box 3, folder 3, FOR, SCPC.

12. Meier and Rudwick, *CORE*, 8, 19–25.

13. Farmer, *Freedom—When?* (New York: Random House, 1966; 1965), 62.
14. Houser quoted in Meier and Rudwick, *CORE*, 20. See also Houser, “Summer Direct-Action Campaign against Jim Crow,” 1945, in which he stated that “at all times the group that is committed to nonviolence will be open to negotiations and it is hoped that more extreme forms of direct action will not be necessary.” *The Papers of the Congress of Racial Equality, 1941–1967* (Sanford, NC: Microfilming Corporation of America, 1980), microfilm, (hereafter cited as *CORE Papers*).
15. Farmer, “The Race Logic of Pacifism,” *Fellowship* 13 (February 1942), 24–25.
16. Rustin to Local Board No. 63, November 16, 1943, series A-3, box 4, folder 7, FOR, SCPC.
17. Bayard Rustin, “The Negro and Nonviolence,” *Fellowship* 12 (October 1942), 166–67.
18. Houser, interview.
19. Erna Harris, “It’s Time We Outgrew ‘Race’ Relations,” *Fellowship* 11 (October 1945), 174–75.
20. Houser, interview.
21. Farmer, *Lay Bare the Heart*, 76.
22. Meier and Rudwick, *CORE*, 81; Ina Sugihara Jones, interview by Sheila Michaels, March 27, 2000, Oral History Research Office, Columbia University, New York; Farmer discusses his relationship with Lula in his autobiography, *Lay Bare the Heart*, 168–184.
23. In a recent essay on Café Society in New York in the 1930s and 1940s, David Stowe argues that personal behavior is political when it is done with “intentionality.” Stowe’s essay focuses on the interracial and cross-class mingling that characterized Café Society and suggests that since these were deliberate attempts to cross boundaries of race and class, the culture of Café Society was a form of political assertion. See David Stowe, “The Politics of Café Society,” *Journal of American History* 84 (March 1998): 1384–1406.
24. Farmer, “We Cannot Destroy Segregation with a Weapon of Segregation,” in *Black Protest Thought in the Twentieth Century*, ed. August Meier, Elliott Rudwick, and Francis L. Broderick (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1971), 249.
25. See James Tracy, *Direct Action: Radical Pacifism from the Union Eight to the Chicago Seven* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 34.
26. See, for example, Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981).

27. Meier and Rudwick, *CORE*, 314–15, 319–22. See also Norman Hill, “We Must Be Concerned with the Kind of Society for all Workers,” in *Black Protest Thought in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Meier, Rudwick, and Broderick, 440; Rustin, “From Protest to Politics: The Future of the Civil Rights Movement” (1964), reprinted in Devon W. Carbado and Donald Weise, eds., *Time on Two Crosses: The Collected Writings of Bayard Rustin* (San Francisco, CA: Cleis Press, 2003), 116–29; and D’Emilio, *Lost Prophet*, 393–416.

28. Meier and Rudwick, *CORE*, 322.

29. See Farmer, interviewer unknown and date unknown (circa 1969), Box 2R641, Farmer Papers.

30. Farmer, *Freedom—When?*, 47, 36, 46. Emphasis in original.

31. Farmer’s refusal to support the moratorium on demonstrations has been the subject of some dispute, as D’Emilio recently has suggested that, despite his claims to the contrary, Farmer favored the moratorium. Still, whether he personally supported it or not, Farmer deferred to the democratic spirit of the civil rights movement and let CORE’s National Council make the decision to repudiate it. See D’Emilio, *Lost Prophet*, 385–86.

32. Farmer to Muste, January 8, 1942, series A-3, box 2, folder 1, FOR, SCPC.

33. Farmer, interviewer and date unknown (circa 1969), Box 2R641, Farmer Papers.

34. Farmer, *Freedom—When?*, 88.

35. Farmer, interview by John Britton, September 1968, New York City, Box 2R641, Farmer Papers.

36. Clayborne Carson makes a similar argument in his history of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). See Carson, *In Struggle*, especially part 2.

37. Farmer, *Freedom—When?*, 92, 95.

38. *Ibid.*, 87. Emphasis in original.

39. *Ibid.*, 89.

40. *Ibid.*, 118. Emphasis in original.

41. *Ibid.*, 90–91. See also Farmer, *Lay Bare the Heart*, 255.

42. *Ibid.*, 80, 17. Emphasis in original.

43. D’Emilio, *Lost Prophet*, 401.

44. Farmer, *Freedom—When?*, 98–99. Emphasis in original.

45. *Ibid.*, 82, 99.

46. *Ibid.*, 118–19.

47. Farmer, *Lay Bare the Heart*, 186.

48. “Race Relations in Crisis,” June 16, 1963, transcript of roundtable discussion with Richard Heffner on “American Experience,” Box 2R641, Farmer Papers.

49. W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Chicago, IL: A.C. McClurg & Co., 1903).

50. Farmer, *Freedom—When?*, 122.

51. See Farmer, “A Few Guidelines for Organizational Expansion,” October 9, 1964, and National Action Council Minutes, October 10–12, 1964, CORE Papers. *Freedom—When?* was a more comprehensive statement of the agenda he put forward in this proposal.

52. Meier and Rudwick, *CORE*, 326.

53. *Ibid.*, 318.

54. Robert Gore, quoted in Meier and Rudwick, *CORE*, 206.

55. New York CORE, Report to the 1965 Convention, CORE Papers.

56. *Ibid.*

57. See Meier and Rudwick, *CORE*, 380.

58. 1965 Convention, CORE Papers.

59. 1965 Convention, CORE Papers. For quote, see Farmer, interviewer and date unknown (circa 1969), Box 2R641, Farmer Papers.

60. 1965 Convention, CORE Papers. *New York Times*, July 4, 1965, copy in CORE Papers.

61. See Meier and Rudwick, *CORE*, 424.

62. See *ibid.*, 361–64.

63. This argument fits well with recent scholarship on the New Left, which has shown that the disintegration of the Students for a Democratic Society in 1969 should not obscure the fact that the movement remained dynamic through the early 1970s. See, for example, Doug Rossinow, *The Politics of Authenticity: Liberalism, Christianity, and the New Left in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

64. Farmer, interview with Britton. Farmer resigned from CORE in 1976 after a clash with the increasingly conservative Roy Innis, who emphasized black business.

65. Farmer, *Lay Bare the Heart*, 224.

66. Peniel E. Joseph, “Black Liberation without Apology: Reconceptualizing the Black Power Movement,” *Black Scholar* 31 (Fall–Winter 2001): 2–19.