

The Shockley Incident: a considered viewpoint

Freedom of speech is not an unlimited freedom, even in the United States. If one preaches the violent overthrow of the government he can be jailed; if one mouths obscenities he offends public morality and can be arrested; if one slanders another person he can be made to pay damages. But there is apparently no law against the slander of the black race by a white scientist.

Shockley would not be allowed to speak in any black community in the world, academic or otherwise. But Dartmouth College, upholding the sanctity of free discourse and ignoring its responsibility to the black minority on campus, gave him a platform to publicly disseminate repugnant theories which had already been repudiated by his scientific colleagues.

To what end was this permission granted? That certain professors might engage Shockley in rhetorical jousting and win plaudits for their defence of the blacks at the expense of the blacks? These knights in shining armor must reexamine their motives. Their whiteness is not under attack. Their image of themselves, their intelligence, their character, their dignity remain unsullied by Shockley's smear campaign.

Black men in this country have been struggling for three hundred years to rid themselves of the cancer of white racism. There can be no moral, ethical, or intellectual principle, in this year of grace 1969, that would justify a "free and open discourse" of a racist attack on the inherent aptitudes of black people.

To give Shockley a hearing at Dartmouth suggests that his argument was worth discussing, worth debating. But we are told his thesis is worthless. In fact it is not only worthless but repulsive to black people and, in the context of black-white relations in this country, it is dangerous. A man is not free to shout "Fire!" in a crowded auditorium when there is no fire. This lie may endanger life and limb and the perpetrator is rightly condemned. How then can Shockley be given freedom at Dartmouth to shout his lies which in the past and today have caused grievous suffering to millions of black men and women?

Black students at Dartmouth acted with courage, restraint and astuteness to prevent Shockley from mouthing slanders against them and their race. No black jury would condemn their action. And a white jury is patently ineligible to pass judgment. If an offence has been committed the responsibility lies with those who aided and abetted the expression of these slanders by giving Shockley permission to speak and providing him a platform to do so.