

Cotton Capital: The *Guardian* cynically “discovers” its links to the slave trade—Part 1

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The Guardian has long cultivated its position as the voice of the British liberal bourgeoisie and middle class. Its recent handwringing over its own past has laid bare the realities of its progressive reputation—not just historically, but very much in the present.

Its “Cotton Capital” series began last month with great fanfare, followed by a slew of high-profile articles. The *Guardian* has been investigating the trade and commercial links of its founder, John Edward Taylor (1791-1844) and his 11 financial backers.

The paper now boasts of unearthing evidence of their links to the transatlantic slave trade and slave labour in the cotton industry.

The surprise is entirely manufactured: these links will have been well-known to all but the most ignorant of the paper’s editorial staff. Taylor and his backers represented a layer of cotton merchants in its trade centre, Manchester. They founded the *Manchester Guardian* in 1821 (it shortened the name in 1959) to advance their class interests that were intimately connected to British capitalism’s dependence on slave labour, at first directly for the primitive accumulation of capital, in the Triangular Trade, and then indirectly, in accruing raw materials produced by slaves.

When slavery became uneconomic and limiting for Britain’s imperialist bourgeoisie, because it cost more to keep a slave than to employ a proletarian wage slave, they had no qualms about enjoying the benefits of the continued reliance of other capitalists on it.

In the cotton industry, particularly, British capitalism remained dependent on materials produced by slave labour, predominantly in America. Cotton was the industry that prompted Marx’s observation, “Capital comes dripping from head to foot, from every pore, with blood and dirt.”

Marx explained the relationship between slavery and capitalist exploitation: “Whilst the cotton industry introduced child-slavery in England, it gave in the United States a stimulus to the transformation of the earlier, more or less patriarchal slavery, into a system of commercial exploitation. In fact, the veiled slavery of the wage workers in Europe needed, for its pedestal, slavery pure and simple in the new world.”

The abolitionist ex-slave Frederick Douglass—a frequent speaker in Manchester—spoke plainly: “The price of human flesh on the Mississippi was regulated by the price of cotton in Manchester.”

Why then the professions of shock at the discovery of supposedly unknown connections? The *Guardian*’s research was commissioned in 2020, in the aftermath of the US police murder of George Floyd. This triggered multi-racial global protests in response to systemic inequality and class repression.

Legacies of slavery, like the statue of slave trader Edward Colston in Bristol, became a focus of the protest. But they also provided a section of the middle class with an opportunity to derail and divert this nascent working-class protest into the dead-end of identity politics, portraying police repression solely in terms of race and advocating various reformist palliatives such as changes to the school curriculum and measures to encourage black community oversight of the police, employment quotas

and the like.

The *Guardian* editorial board and management were entirely supportive of such efforts to conceal and divert from the class issues raised by the George Floyd protests, having led the way in promoting identity politics against class politics. However, they knew that their efforts could easily backfire, given the newspaper’s history.

Pre-emptive measures had to be taken, to prevent any potentially embarrassing backlash. One month after Colston’s statue was toppled into Bristol Harbour, cheered on by a crowd of 10,000, the *Guardian*’s owners, the Scott Trust, launched an investigation into the paper’s founders and their “wider personal, familial and commercial networks... in the context of the slave economy, the wider cotton trade in Manchester generally in the 19th century, and the global networks that facilitated its growth.”

The Cotton Capital series

The commentary resulting from such motivations of damage control is at best obtuse and at worst misleading and self-serving.

Natalie Morris, for example, writes of school trips to the International Slavery Museum in Liverpool—the key port for both the slave trade on which, Marx wrote, it “waxed fat”—and the products of slave labour. “Like the slave trade in the past century,” Marx noted, “so in this century trade in cotton, produced by slaves, has formed the material basis of Liverpool’s greatness.”

Morris writes that she was “taught about Liverpool’s slavery past, not Manchester’s—that has to change.” The cities are in fact barely an hour apart by road, yet recognition of the economic effects of slavery for Morris seems to vanish somewhere along the M62.

The political impulse at work is to rescue the *Guardian*’s progressive reputation while acknowledging the stain of slavery. The method is to present this history as a tale of liberalism that wandered off course; in Editor-in-Chief Katharine Viner’s words, which allowed itself to get “too close to the Manchester cotton merchants” and fall into “complacency.” The implicit argument of the Cotton Capital articles is that it was previously so hard to conceive of liberalism’s relationship with slavery because of its otherwise unambiguously progressive heritage.

The historian David Olusoga joined the Scott Trust board in 2018. When signing up to the board, he writes in the form of a mea culpa, “I completely failed to recognise the crucial and obvious connections between the founders of the *Guardian* and the history of slavery. Because when approached about joining the Scott Trust my mind turned—subconsciously and exclusively—to one form of British history: the history of class, 19th-century liberalism and reform, out of which the newspaper emerged. An arena of domestic British history that—from when

it was first taught to me at school—was presented as having no connections to histories that took place beyond Britain’s shores.”

Subconsciously? Two years earlier, Olusoga had written succinctly of Manchester’s role as “The shop window for the cotton industry,” supplied with slave-produced materials via Liverpool. That he later chose to overlook the possibility of a Manchester cotton merchant directly benefiting from this points to self-interest overcoming historical scruples. He now somewhat belatedly argues that the histories of colonial slavery and capitalism have been separated and that this “conceals the history of slavery and the slave trade behind a distorted and exaggerated memorialisation of abolition and a select number of the leading male [sic] abolitionists.”

Olusoga’s article for the series, “The Ties That Bind US”, shows how the falsification of liberalism’s history requires an effacement of the socialist tradition in the working class, which showed liberalism and the *Guardian* up for what they were (and are): institutions and ideologies of the capitalist class which enjoyed the proceeds of slavery in America as part and parcel of its exploitation of the working class at home.

This is most obvious with columnist Gary Younge, who writes of “How Britain Buried Its History of Slavery.” He notes that during the American Civil War (April 12, 1861-May 9, 1865), Manchester’s cotton workers had starved on the streets rather than handling slave-produced Southern cotton. Abraham Lincoln applauded this act of heroism, “which has not been surpassed in any age or in any country.”

Younge claims that “the workers’ support for the blockade showcased Manchester’s much-lauded liberal tradition”, while supposedly laying bare “an essential feature of the city’s history that is rarely acknowledged: its economic dependence on the proceeds of slavery.”

The supposed paradox invoked by Younge is untangled by decoupling the struggles of the working class and “Manchester’s much-lauded liberal tradition.” Manchester’s ties with slavery and the popular opposition which developed during the American Civil War were the product of two opposed class interests and political traditions.

The *Guardian* is very coy about the “influential members of Manchester society, involved in key networks of the economy” which founded the paper. Why so shy? They were local capitalists. Some were prominent, like George William Wood, MP, twice president of Manchester’s Chamber of Commerce. All were intimately involved in the cotton trade, and thus implicated to a greater or lesser extent in slavery. “Cotton Capital” reports that nine of the 11 backers were linked to transatlantic slavery, but only because they were not able to establish details of the other two in the available time.

The most heavily involved was Sir George Philips, partner in a firm which owned a slave estate in Jamaica. Philips became a partner in 1805, before the 1807 Slave Trade Act prohibited the trade in the British Empire, but not slavery itself. After the 1833 Slavery Abolition Act (which worked towards a gradualist prohibition more generally across the Empire—territories owned by the East India Company were excluded from its provision, for example), Philips claimed compensation for 108 freed slaves on the Jamaican estate. He was unsuccessful, although one of his partners was compensated for them.

Taylor himself was a partner in a manufacturing company which “almost certainly” sourced its materials from slave-owning locations. He was also a partner in a cotton merchant company, which imported raw cotton “produced by enslaved Africans in the West Indies, Brazil, Guyana, Suriname and the southern states of the US.” The company may also have been exporting finished goods back to slave-owning regions.

These cotton merchants and mill owners were the social base for the *Guardian*’s support for the South in the American Civil War and its call for workers blockading Southern cotton to be forced back into the mills.

The *Guardian* and the Peterloo Massacre

Cotton Capital emphasises its “shock” at the *Guardian*’s connections with slavery by largely ignoring the hostile attitude of these supremely wealthy individuals and their paper to the working class. This rests on emphasising the professed progressive stance taken by the paper in the aftermath of the Peterloo Massacre.

The August 16, 1819 Manchester rally calling for universal male suffrage and the massacre which ensued were a pivotal moment in British working class history. The working class, as it emerged and formed itself as a class, had looked to sections of radical and liberal bourgeoisie for leadership and political expression, but was now beginning to respond for itself.

The rally was held to hear landowner Henry Hunt call for reform of parliamentary representation, but disenfranchised workers were also mobilising against the social catastrophe and brutal exploitation necessitated by the economic slump that followed the Napoleonic Wars.

In the immediate aftermath of Peterloo, the Jamaican-born London radical orator Robert Wedderburn announced at his weekly Unitarian service that “the Revolution had already started in blood there and... it must now also end in blood here.” His audience agreed with the proposition that Peterloo was nothing less than murder, just as a week earlier, Wedderburn had won majority support on the question, “Has a slave an inherent right to slay his Master, who refuses him his liberty?”

Taylor witnessed the massacre first-hand, but he was no enthusiastic supporter of the rally. He wrote that the speakers “appealed not to the reason but to the passions and the suffering of their abused and credulous fellow-countrymen, from whose ill-requited industry they extort for themselves the means of a plentiful and comfortable existence.”

Taylor had apprenticed to a cotton manufacturer and became a successful merchant. This was the basis of his personal wealth, which was thus dependent on slave-produced raw cotton and his antipathy to the radical demands made at St. Peter’s Field.

He played an important role in circulating news of the massacre. Seeing the *Times*’s correspondent arrested, he rushed a report to the London paper to ensure publication and subsequently conducted extensive research among the survivors. The experiences pushed him towards advocating parliamentary reform, but in the interests of the mercantile bourgeoisie. He felt no impulse to extend the franchise to workers, arguing that “the qualification to vote ought to be... not so low as to give anything like a preponderating influence to the mere populace.”

Some sections of the radical bourgeoisie were forced into conflict with their own class on questions like suffrage and slavery, whether from moral conviction, like the abolitionist William Wilberforce, or from growing acknowledgement of the social and economic realities, like Hunt. That was not the case with Taylor and his cohort. Their own liberalism was characterised by determined resistance to radicalism.

The government’s response to Peterloo and the fury that followed was the infamous Six Acts, aimed at suppressing protest and dissent, including shutting down the radical press. In 1821, the liberal, politically radical *Manchester Observer*, which had supported the demands of the Peterloo protesters—and whose editor James Wroe coined the term Peterloo—was forced to close due to government persecution. Taylor and a group of like-minded local businessmen took advantage of the gap to produce a paper expressing their interests. Far from representing the radical press, the *Guardian* was a beneficiary of its suppression. Taylor editorialised that the *Manchester Guardian* would “warmly advocate the cause of Reform [and] endeavour to assist in the diffusion of just principles of Political Economy.”

To be continued



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