

Cotton Capital: The *Guardian* cynically “discovers” its links to the slave trade—Part 2

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This is the second of a two-part series. Part one can be read here.

Defending British capitalism

The *Guardian* never wavered in lining up against any political challenge to the fundamental interests of the bourgeoisie. In 1839, the paper editorialised against the Chartist *Northern Star*, encouraging legal repression: “As no jury could possibly mistake the object of the writer of the preceding passage, so we imagine, would there be no doubt as to the verdict which such a jury would feel bound to deliver.”

Three years earlier, George Condry, editor of local radical newspaper the *Manchester and Salford Advertiser*, had called the *Manchester Guardian* the “foul prostitute and dirty parasite of the worst portion of the mill-owners.”

During the 1840s, the *Manchester Guardian* opposed the Corn Laws. Its opposition, however, was in the tradition of the bourgeois Anti-Corn Law League, which called for repeal on the basis that free trade would lower costs and reduce wages.

Workers, desperate for cheaper bread, also needed repeal but actively rejected the League’s politics. Friedrich Engels noted that the attendance of Chartists at League meetings “attained their end—to prove that the League did not, as it pretended, represent them.”

In 1847, Engels wrote of a reported meeting on the cotton industry. As proof that “this meeting was the exclusive work of the capitalists,” Engels felt “it should suffice to tell you that the only newspaper to which the resolutions were sent, the newspaper from which all the other newspapers borrowed them, was the *Manchester Guardian*, the organ of the manufacturers.”

When the *Northern Star* reported the resolutions, he said, “it adds that it has taken them from this capitalist newspaper, a damning observation in the eyes of the workers.”

In a memorable passage from his seminal work, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, Engels, who made a close study of the Manchester mill-owners, was blunt: “I have never seen a class so deeply demoralised, so incurably debased by selfishness, so corroded within, so incapable of progress, as the English bourgeoisie; and I mean by this, especially the bourgeoisie proper, particularly the Liberal, Corn Law repealing bourgeoisie. For it nothing exists in this world, except for the sake of money, itself not excluded. It knows no bliss save that of rapid gain, no pain save that of losing gold. In the presence of this avarice and lust of gain, it is not possible for a single

human sentiment or opinion to remain untainted.”

Engels continued, “Ultimately it is self-interest, and especially money gain, which alone determines them. I once went into Manchester with such a bourgeois, and spoke to him of the bad, unwholesome method of building, the frightful condition of the working-peoples quarters, and asserted that I had never seen so ill-built a city. The man listened quietly to the end, and said at the corner where we parted: ‘And yet there is a great deal of money made here, good morning, sir.’ (*The Condition of the Working Class in England*, chapter: The attitude of the bourgeoisie towards the proletariat, pp 312-13, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1973)

Confirming the continuity of the *Manchester Guardian*’s hostile attitude to the historic struggle against slavery waged in America, after Abraham Lincoln’s assassination on April 15, 1865, by Confederate sympathiser John Wilkes Booth, it described his “rule... as a series of acts abhorrent to every true notion of constitutional right and human liberty.” This was called out at public meetings in the city.

Viner describes this as “period of complacency” in order to promote the notion of a liberal renaissance begun by the arrival of Charles Prestwich Scott as editor in 1872. Scott was a more complex figure than his predecessors. A pacifist who opposed the Boer War and the First World War, to his eternal credit in 1929 he advocated for Leon Trotsky to be granted asylum in Britain following his expulsion from the Soviet Union by Stalin. The *Guardian* also provided a platform for Trotsky to refute the slanders against him during the Moscow Trials (1936-1938). On this record it must be said that no representative of today’s *Guardian* is fit to lace Scott’s boots.

Nevertheless, Scott remained a trenchant defender of bourgeois interests, writing for example of the Suffragettes that they were “worthy of a better cause and saner leadership.”

Describing the 1916 Easter Uprising against British imperialist rule in Ireland as “a very disagreeable incident,” Scott called the execution of Padraig Pearse and James Connolly “a fate which they invoked and of which they would probably not complain.”

Scott’s response to the 1926 General Strike was alarm at the calling out of the press unions. He wrote, “Will not the General Strike cease to be counted henceforth as a possible or legitimate weapon of industrial warfare? May not the very idea of treating industry as a theatre of warfare come to be regarded as barbaric?”

After the strike, the *Guardian* set up a company union with no right to strike.

The *Guardian*’s pro-imperialist “restorative justice” manoeuvres

At every point, the *Guardian* has loyally defended the interests of British imperialism and continues to do so. Its response to the wholly predictable “revelations” about a section of Manchester cotton traders in the 1820s was to say its early history now stands “shorn of [the] idealist illusions” that had served to conceal “the economic interests of its founders, which were hiding in plain sight.”

Who is any of this meant to convince? Who are the intended audience?

There are clues in the paper’s proposed response to the admissions. It pledges to make amends for its historic guilt with a 10-year reparations programme of “restorative justice.” This, they say, is “a process that focuses on repairing harm,” by seeking “to facilitate an acknowledgement of the harm caused, collaboration on how to make things right, which can include compensation, and healing.”

To this end, the Scott Trust expects “to commit more than £10m to this programme of work over the next 10 years.” The paper’s 2021/22 financial results reported the total value of the Scott Trust’s endowment fund and other cash holdings as £1,284 million, up from £1,148.5 million in 2021. £10 million is peanuts.

Rather than limited company ownership, the Trust offers the newspaper cash injections of up to £30 million a year. In 2022, the *Guardian* performed well enough to generate a £6.7 million cash surplus rather than requiring further withdrawals. The paper has drastically restructured in recent years to accommodate losses—the 2022 surplus reversed a £15.6 million shortfall the previous year.

The reparations outlay is a minimal commitment that will cover “community projects and programmes” in the US Sea Islands and Jamaica. More important is the *quid pro quo* that it will “increase the scope and ambition of *Guardian* reporting on the Caribbean, South America and Africa, and on Black communities in the UK and US (up to 12 new editorial roles).”

Jamaica’s poverty in 2022 was 12.6 percent. Youth unemployment is 16.7 percent. Last year, with inflation averaging 10.3 percent, the government raised the minimum wage to J\$9,000 per week—around US\$59. Inflation is now just under 8 percent, while food inflation is still at 11.3 percent.

Even if all the Trust’s committed outlay were focused here it would barely touch the social crisis in the former colonies. But while £10 million will solve no social problems for the masses, it will address the immediate needs of a self-interested layer of the middle class.

It is not hard to see why Gary Younge is so evasive in his formulations. At the end of his first degree—after a year’s paid sabbatical as a student union officer—he studied journalism on a *Guardian* bursary. He worked for the paper for 26 years, rising to editor-at-large. On the strength of this, he was appointed professor of sociology at the University of Manchester in 2019. He arrived with a recommendation from *Guardian* editor Viner, describing him as “one of the leading thinkers and writers on politics and society working in Britain today.”

Others will want a slice of the action and the bids are already coming in. When the paper appealed for comment on the series, noted black nationalist Lee Jasper made his pitch. Praising the *Guardian* for having “a vital role to play in shaping public discourse around issues of race and racism,” he said it must first tackle the fact that “Black journalists and other people of colour have been fighting for years to be represented and included in the newsroom, but continue to face barriers.”

He insisted that “reparations cannot be effective without addressing internal issues,” and called for money to be channelled into working

with “Black communities to co-produce a radical antiracist framework for the company.”

In case anyone missed his point, he signed himself off as “Lee Jasper, Black activist, former senior political adviser to [former Labour Mayor of London] Ken Livingstone.” Jasper has decades of experience hustling jobs like this—until 1995, he earned up to £500 a day training the Metropolitan Police in community issues—and he knows an opportunity when he sees one.

This is the layer the *Guardian* is grooming. The paper can be relied on to promote more such initiatives, which will have in common an appearance of social criticism while serving to prevent actual change.

The “Cotton Capital” series is a further consolidation of a hostile social base to use against the working class. In response to devastating social inequality, the *Guardian* champions every diversionary and reactionary form of identity politics based on race, gender, sexual identity, etc., to use as an ideological weapon against class politics.

The petty-bourgeois advocates of identity politics will, in turn, support the *Guardian* in all its numerous political crimes, for which no apology will be forthcoming. If the *Guardian* is apologising now for historic crimes, readers can be positive it is preparing for new ones in the future.

Where is the apology, for example, for the barrage of lies it published against Julian Assange in the interests of British and American imperialism for a decade? When, 10 years after launching its campaign of character assassination, the paper finally issued a call for Assange’s freedom, it was a tacit admission of the political role the paper had played for the British state. So dependable has the *Guardian* been in this role that it earned special praise from the Ministry of Defence at a committee meeting on press restrictions.

Today the *Guardian* is above all a mouthpiece for a torrent of pro-NATO, anti-Russian propaganda aimed at supporting and extending war in Europe which defines its true political role far more than any belated and insincere moral posturing over slavery in the nineteenth century.

Concluded.



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