

MAKING THE CASE FOR THE LEGACY OF SLAVERY

This Paper draws upon papers read at a Seminar organised by the Open University in conjunction with the Movement for Justice and Reconciliation in July 2015, chaired by Professor John Wolffe. Other speakers were Professor James Walvin, Professor David Killingray, Professor Robert Beckford, Dr John Maiden, Nigel Pocock, Jenny Cooper, The Revd Alton Bell, Khareem Jamal, Afua Hirsch, and Dr Clifford Hill. The presentations at the seminar explored a range of aspects of slavery and its legacies. This paper highlights some key implications of their analysis. It has been specially prepared for a meeting in a committee room of the House of Lords chaired by Baroness Cox, 10th November 2015.

The Slave Trade

12.5 million Africans were forcibly transported from West Africa across the Atlantic to the Americas and the Caribbean Islands by British slavers between 1562 and 1807. At least 1 million are thought to have perished on the journey which was part of a lucrative trade triangle between Britain, West Africa and the Americas.

The middle passage was the most brutal and dehumanising, but each leg of the triangle was profitable providing a market for manufactured goods from Britain, stimulating the Industrial Revolution and offering a ready market for produce from the Caribbean and America – sugar, rum, molasses, tobacco, cotton. After 1721 mahogany from Jamaica became greatly in demand as a highly fashionable wood in Georgian England for doors, wall panelling, furniture, and luxury goods such as carved sugar bowls.

The Wealth of the Nation

The slave trade was highly profitable and contributed enormously to the growing wealth of Britain. By 1800 two thirds of the British economy was related in some way to the slave trade. Most Members of both Houses of Parliament and members of the monarchy as well as the aristocracy and many in the middle classes either owned slaves or shares in the plantations. The records of the Slave Compensation Commission currently being examined by University College London present a complete picture of British slavery as it was on 1st August 1834. They show that there were 46,000 individual owners of slaves who claimed compensation under the Act of Emancipation.

Under the terms of the Slavery Abolition Act 1833 the British Government set aside £20 million to cover claims from owners of slaves in compensation for the loss of their assets. This sum is estimated today to be between £16 billion and £17 billion (*The Observer*, 12 July 2015). Whatever its value in today's money it is a vast sum but of greater significance is the fact that the Act gave not one penny to the slaves it set free. In fact the Act required them to give 45 hours a week free labour to their former owners for a period of four years so that they were contributing to the cost of their own emancipation while being given no compensation for the suffering of their years under slavery. Surely this must be high on the list of the greatest acts of injustice on the British Statute Book.

Slave Ownership

There were many thousands more ordinary citizens who owned small shares in the slave ships. A large part of the population of Britain was involved in slavery if only as consumers. This is why it took nearly

another 30 years after the abolition of the slave trade for slavery itself to be abolished. It was an age of brutality when children could be hanged for stealing a handkerchief in the market. Descriptions of conditions on the slave ships had moved the nation but once the trade was stopped in 1807 there was little demand, even from Wilberforce, for the whole institution of slavery to go; it was part of our way of life.

Racial dominance of black people by white people had become institutionalised in society and this continued in colonial administration throughout the British Empire long after 1833. It was a feature of British administration right up to the post-World War II period and the granting of independence to colonial nations from the Empire leading to the formation of the British Commonwealth.

Black and White Relationships

For the Africans themselves in the Caribbean the slave ships established the relationship between black and white. It was a brutal experience designed to condition them to the savagery of plantation life where the white man was in total control. This relationship was institutionalised by colonial law which is well documented in thousands of records listing the value of each individual African on the estates even to very young babies – for each human life there was a monetary value: they were ‘property’, enslaved chattels, and they were totally at the disposal of their white masters who could sell them to another estate, physically beat them to death or sexually abuse them. From these sexual encounters the African women produced many babies of lighter skin which resulted in a colour-coded form of social differentiation that still exists today and is part of the legacy of slavery.

Burying the Past

Britain has been highly successful in burying colonial slavery for 200 years. It has been deleted from our Island story: airbrushed out of history; excluded from our history books and from our schools’ curriculum. This has been so successfully achieved that when British people think about slavery we think America: slavery is American; the stories of Uncle Tom and Mark Twain’s accounts of life around the Mississippi. All this is confirmed by films such as ‘Gone with the Wind’, ‘Roots’, ‘Twelve Years a Slave’. When we think of slavery it is the cotton plantations of the Southern States of the USA, it’s never the sugar plantations of Jamaica and Barbados. We have erased that from our history: it never happened!

This colonial “Holocaust Denial” was achieved by raising William Wilberforce to the state of national hero with a place in Westminster Abbey and a memorial approaching sainthood. Wilberforce was the leader of the Clapham Group of MPs who were supported by a large number of multi-ethnic abolitionists whose names are hardly known today. Scores of books have been written on the life of Wilberforce which have convinced the British public that our only involvement in slavery was its abolition from the British Empire which eventually forced others to follow our great humanitarian example. Even in 2007 the only film marking the 200th anniversary of the abolition of the slave trade was a Wilberforce biopic “Amazing Grace” – a film that ignored the huge contribution of the Africans themselves to their own emancipation and only showed Wilberforce and his white friends, climaxing in a triumphal parade of the Scots Guards, leaving everyone feeling good about our past!

Public Ignorance

The result of this selective history is a legacy of incredible ignorance in the British public of what actually happened in the British colonies during the centuries of slavery. This is recorded in the research report from the Zong Project which was part of the 2007 slave trade commemorations when an 18th century replica slave ship was opened to the public from Tower Pier on the Thames in London. The research, completed by over 6,000 respondents, showed that a mere 9% of white visitors had significant

knowledge of British colonial history and of the slave trade. These respondents were all people who had chosen to attend an exhibition on slavery and who paid to go on board the ship, so they clearly had an interest in the subject from which we may conclude that significantly less than 9% of the general public know about our history.

Why the Silence?

Why is this? Why the 200 year silence? Why is it that the records of the Slave Compensation Commission were left undisturbed until UCL began to look at them in 2010? Is it that we are ashamed of our historical past; or could there be an even more reprehensible motive – the fear of reparations? A number of MPs and Members of the House of Lords went to see the Zong slave ship exhibition in 2007 but there were notable exceptions.

The chairman of Tate & Lyle steadfastly refused an invitation, so too did the Queen and all members of the Royal Family, so too did Prime Minister Tony Blair, although his deputy John Prescott MP and Cabinet Minister Stephen Timms MP did pay a visit. A spokesman for 10 Downing Street said quite openly that the Prime Minister would not attend or issue an apology for the slave trade because of the issue of reparations. This still seems to be official Government policy as seen in David Cameron's refusal to discuss the issue with the Prime Minister of Jamaica during his visit to the island in September 2015.

Caribbean Legacy

The legacy of slavery among white British people is ignorance: but what of the legacy among the Africans in the Caribbean or here among the West Indian Diaspora? The first thing the visitor to Barbados or Jamaica notices is the predominance of English names. Everywhere you go, the counties and towns and villages all have English names: but so too do the people; their African origins were deliberately blotted out by the plantocracy; they were given the names of their 'owners' which they still bear today as part of the legacy of slavery. Many African Caribbeans still see their British names (Scots and English) as the 'branding' they still carry from plantation life.

De-Africanisation

The de-Africanisation of the colonial population in the West Indian islands was a deliberate policy of enforcing white supremacy in line with the de-humanising of the estate workers. Their African roots were destroyed along with their language, their customs, their culture, their history, their identity and their freedom.

This lack of historic cultural roots is a major destabilising factor in the legacy of slavery today. Young people cannot look back at their African roots with pride: they can only see slavery with all its negative connotations. This is one of the difficulties facing teachers in multicultural classrooms vividly described by a London teacher. She said, "**As soon as I begin talking about slavery all the black kids heads go down.**" Of course, if the facts of slavery were known it would be the white kids whose heads should go down, but we have deliberately distorted history to present a different picture. White supremacy is still very much alive in our 21st century culture despite its boasted tolerance and equality. **This situation will remain until we are prepared to face up to our past history and teach our children the truth!**

Social Values

Tackling the legacy of slavery begins with a determination to face the truth. Slavery has been ground into the faith, soul and psyche of African Caribbean people. Its effects can be seen in family life where

discipline is still harsh, occasionally even violent, which is a throwback to the 'bacra' who carried out the brutal beatings on the estates which the slaves were forced to witness.

Social values of today have their origins in slavery from which comes the attitude that white is good and black is bad that is reflected in the colour code where lighter skin is accorded higher social status. This social value can lead to a sense of self-loathing which in terms of social behaviour can lead to black-on-black violence which is seen both in gangland America as well as in Britain. The lack of self-esteem has led some psychiatrists to identify a phenomenon of "post-traumatic slave syndrome".

Another social value is the failure of our educational system to meet the needs of African Caribbean children which results in under-achievement, an above-average level of exclusions and reduction of employment and life chances.

The media emphasis upon modern slavery, in contrast to the few programmes dealing with historic colonial slavery, by some is seen as part of a continuing conspiracy of silence. At best it is unhelpful and so too is media coverage of racial issues in the USA which too often show black violence and rarely tell the whole story.

Personal Values

Personal values as well as social values reflect the legacy of slavery. Many African Caribbeans have a fear of animals, especially dogs, which can be directly traced to plantation slavery. There is also a widespread fear of water which arguably goes back to the notorious middle passage of the slave trade.

Mental health problems also reflect a legacy of slavery particularly in terms of the significantly higher incidence of schizophrenia among African Caribbeans than in the white population, both in Britain and in Jamaica.

Family Life

It is in family life that the legacy of slavery is most vividly reflected. Since the 1980s statistics have regularly shown a significantly higher level of single families in the African Caribbean communities in Britain than among white families in the same areas. Fatherlessness in family life is prevalent which has clear links to the past. In the Caribbean islands after 1807 when the planters were unable to replenish their African slave labour they encouraged the strongest males to sire as many babies as possible. The older women who were too weak to be pressed into the field gangs were employed in caring for the babies and children. These two factors established the matriarchal institution of the family and the fecklessness of fathers which results in many boys and young men having no stable male role model in their lives.

Fatherlessness

Fatherlessness is not a phenomenon confined to the African Caribbean Diaspora; it affects many young people in all classes of society in Britain today due to the increasing level of family breakdown. But it has the greatest impact upon social behaviour in inner-city areas where it is linked with unemployment and poverty. Both black and white young people in these areas have a shared sense of social alienation which affects their behaviour.

This was demonstrated in Home Office statistics for arrests following the 2011 Tottenham riots which spread to other parts of London and British cities.

- 90% of those brought before the courts were male and half were under 21
- 46% were black (almost all were from the Caribbean community)
- 42% were white
- 7% were Asian

- 5% were classified as "other". Of the young people involved -
- 42% were in receipt of free school meals compared to a national average of 16%
- 62% had a previous conviction or caution
- 65% had some form of educational or special need
- a third had been excluded from school, compared with the national average of 6%
- 10% had been permanently excluded compared with the national average for under 15 year olds of 0.1%.

Inner-City Deprivation

Clearly these were not race riots but they reflected the shared deprivation of inner-city life. The fact that the highest proportion were African Caribbeans and very few were from the African community is a reflection of the legacy of colonial slavery which the Africans did not experience.

In sociological terms it is arguable that the social alienation in white working classes in Britain can be traced to what William Wilberforce described as "white slavery" arising from the 18th century Industrial Revolution. This became institutionalised in the 19th century struggle of the working classes for political representation and human rights. It is one of the aims of the MJR to investigate this phenomenon and its links with the legacy of colonial slavery in current British inner-city areas.

The level of special need and socio-economic disadvantage among both black and white young people is highly significant. It is an indicator that if nothing is done to alleviate this toxic social situation our inner city streets will once again be torn asunder by social disorder when a trigger occurs to explode the tensions.

Reparations

We cannot continue to ignore the facts of life in our inner-city areas where the legacy of colonial slavery and industrial exploitation collide into social scenes of shared deprivation. The one can be traced back to **The Slave Trade** and the other to **The Industrial Revolution**. The common source of this exploitation was those who owned the plantations and the factories. As Bishop Nazir-Ali put it at the recent launch of MJR: "What we see in common in colonial slavery and industrial exploitation is the treating of people as less than human". This same vested interest stubbornly resisted reform to both slavery and children's working hours in the 19th century. Are their inheritors now among those resisting calls for reparation?"

MJR is not calling for the payment of sums of money to be paid to individuals, but for an imaginative programme of creative social reparations – repairing broken communities, broken families, and broken lives – this is true 'reparation' which will result in the reconciliation of the socially alienated into wider society where they can play a full and useful part in the life of the nation.

This is the aim of the Movement for Justice and Reconciliation through its programme of Research, Public Education and Community Development.