Racism and the Case for Reparations: A Response to Michael Banner

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Abstract
Racism, that is, the idea that White people are innately superior to people of other ethnicities, especially Black people, is a lie that supported slavery and the slave trade. That lie continues to shape all our lives today including our attitude to the issue of paying reparations to the enslaved. Not only was the original idea of a hierarchy or races a lie, but other falsehoods have been used to hide the atrocities and injustices that were committed based on that first lie. Further, the hold of racism on human society is maintained by a distortion of the issue that results in White people having a visceral reaction to the subject.

Keywords
slavery, racism, slave trade, reparations, ethnicity, Black people, White fragility, identity

Introduction
I am grateful for the opportunity to make this response to the paper, ‘Truth, Lies and Christian Ethics’ by Michael Banner.1 Michael Banner’s offering of his personal story helped me put his ideas in context, so I will do the same. I will start with a brief description of my background in the hope that it will help others put my response in context. After considering some of the issues from that standpoint, I will look at two main issues addressed in the paper, which are the issue of reparation and that of the falsehood that surrounds slavery and racism.

1. Michael Banner, ‘Telling Lies, Telling Tales and Telling (and Doing) the Truth: Racism, Moral Repair and the Case for Reparation’ (this volume).
Facing Up To It

I was born and brought up in Nigeria. Like Banner, I was also the first generation of my family to go to university. I came to Britain in the early 1990s in my mid-twenties and have now lived here for nearly thirty years. Like most immigrants at that time, I really only became conscious of being Black when I came here. Isabel Wilkerson in her book, *Caste*, described how an African woman once said to her that there were no Black people in Africa. This can sound strange until it is explained. What it is saying is that Africans think of their ethnicity as, for example, Igbo or Yoruba or Ashanti or Fante, or Kikuyu or Luo. It is when they come to Europe or America that they become Black. In other words, they are racialized into being Black. Wilkerson notes that something similar happens to Europeans who go to the United States. They start out as Danish, Polish, Scottish etc., but when they get to the USA they become White.

So I became Black when I came here in 1992. I became very interested in the subject of racism fairly quickly, and in 1995 wrote my first publication on the subject: *Issues Around Black People*. Greatly helped by works like *Staying Power* by Peter Fryer, I became aware of how extensive Britain’s role in the slave trade was. But I also very quickly realized that for many British people the country’s involvement with slavery was all about abolition. This is a point Michael Banner makes really well in the paper, describing it as a lie and that approach as a kind of à la carte recollection of history.

I can recall conversations I had at theological college where I am trying hard to let people know how much the UK was involved in the actual trading of enslaved Africans, but was often met with strong resistance. People seemed hurt by what I said and, no doubt, saw me as wicked and troublesome. But evidence to support this was available, if only people were interested in finding it. In this paper Banner discusses the wealth of Sir James Drax, Member of Parliament for South Dorset. We can add to that the fortune of so many others past and present. Fryer’s description in *Staying Power* shows not only how extensive the British trade in enslaved people was, but how far reaching its effects were on the British economy and personal wealth of many individuals and institutions. He noted how the slave trade connected different sectors of the economy:

> It was an enormously profitable system for the planters whose slaves produced the sugar, merchant capitalists who sold them the slave, the industrial capitalist who supplied the manufactured goods with which the slaves were bought and the bankers and commission agents who lent money to all of them.

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2. Isabel Wilkerson, *Caste* (London: Allen Lane, 2020).
3. C. Chike, *Issues Around Black People: A Christian Perspective* (London: SM Publishing, 1995).
4. Peter Fryer, *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain* (London: Pluto Press, 2018).
5. The Legacies of British Slavery project of the University College London demonstrates the extent of the wealth that British people derived from slavery and the slave trade. https://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/ (accessed 14 September 2021).
6. Fryer, *Staying Power*, p. 15.
From the trade, various industries prospered, such as the textile industry in Manchester, cotton manufacturing in Lancashire, gun-making, brass, cutlery and wrought-iron industries in Birmingham, and the copper industry in Swansea. Fryer summed it up in this way:

Thus at dawn of the factory system in Britain, the trade in black slaves directly nourished several important industries and boomed precisely those four provincial towns that, in the 1801 census, ranked immediately after London: Manchester, Liverpool, Birmingham and Bristol.

The contribution of the slave trade to what came to be known as the Industrial Revolution is no less striking:

Funds accumulated from the triangular trade helped to finance James Watt’s steam engine, the south Wales iron and coal industries, the south Yorkshire iron industry, the north Wales slate industry, the Liverpool and Manchester railway and the great Western railway.

All this leads Fryer to make this concluding comment:

Rising British capitalism had a magic money machine, and endless chain with three links: sugar cultivation; manufacturing industry; and the slave trade. And the slave trade was the ‘essential link’. The whole system was frankly regarded as resting on slavery.

It is gratifying to read in this paper an acknowledgement of this aspect of the history and seeing it stated so clearly that the practice of omitting it was deliberate and wrong.

An underlying feeling in the attitude British people have towards their history (an attitude that came through in this paper and which I can testify to in my personal experiences) seems to be that here in the UK we are just too great and too good to do such evil things.

Banner’s paper draws attention to the erroneous nature of this attitude, such as when it quotes the words of the American civil right activist who said that the racism that manifested in Nazi Germany could already be seen in Christian history and in Europe.

Reparation and Lies

Two important points that the paper makes are to do with the payment of reparation for slavery/slave trade and the lies that surround slavery and racism. The paper argues that we in Europe should pay reparations to those in the Caribbean for the injury we caused them. This is something I agree with and I cannot add much to the very thorough argument presented in the paper. But I am not sure why Banner stopped with payment of reparation to

7. Fryer, *Staying Power*, p. 16.
8. Fryer, *Staying Power*, p. 16.
9. Fryer, *Staying Power*, p. 16.
10. Fryer, *Staying Power*, p. 16.
people in the Caribbean. I would add Africa, bearing in mind the millions of able-bodied people taken from that continent. One way of looking at it is that reparation is due to the Caribbean for slavery and to Africa for the slave trade.

Perhaps more important is this: it struck me while reading the paper (and I hasten to add that the paper’s author should be no blame for this), that the reason people still generally struggle with the idea of reparations could be because they still do not think of Africans as human beings equal to White Europeans.

This is quite logical when you break it down:

- The crime (slavery) was based on White supremacy, within which Black people are seen as a sub-human species.
- When it ended, payment of compensation to the enslaved would have affirmed that they had been wronged, but it was the slave-holders who were compensated thereby affirming the position that the enslaved were mere property.
- To pay reparations would be to make a clear departure from that belief. So not paying makes the opposite point and leaves the prevailing assumption in place.
- People can easily make declarations about the equality of different ethnicities, but it is what they would underline with material cost to them that points to the extent of their conviction.
- The continuing prevalence of racism in our midst suggest that this view is not as fanciful as it might sound.
- To use a scenario, if my next-door neighbour overpowers me and takes away my television set and after a week comes back to give me a complete apology for his actions, confessing that he has disabused his mind of the belief that I was not worthy of owning or using a TV, I would probably receive his apology but I would want to know when I will get the TV back! It is getting my property back that would convince me of the genuineness of the apology.

This is where the paper’s use of the story of Zacchaeus felt to me to be on point. Zacchaeus knew he had done something wrong. His repentance produced a change in behaviour whereby he started giving things away to make amends. If there is true change of heart, if Europeans have really stopped thinking that Black people are not equal to them as human beings, they won’t need anyone to tell them to give up the gains that came from that error.11

The second point to address is the paper’s description of both racism and the way its role in history is recalled as lies. I totally agree, of course. Racism, that is, the idea that people who are classified as White are inherently superior to other people, especially

11. Kehinde Andrews makes a similar point in his recent book regarding the use of the word ‘genocide’. Europeans, he writes, use the word more readily when the victims are White people than when they are Black people because at the back of their mind they do not think of Black people as human beings equal to White people. See Kehinde Andrews, The New Age of Empire: How Racism and Colonialism Still Rule the World (London: Allen Lane, 2021).
Black people (or as quoted in the paper, that they are ‘a supreme race born to rule the world’\textsuperscript{12}) was the original lie. And the particular way British history treats slavery, deliberately ignoring Britain’s dominant role as a slave-trading nation, was the cover-up lie. The phrase ‘the big lie’ has been used in history as a name for a story or argument made up to deceive and control a people. Well, racism is the original ‘big lie’; made up mainly to justify slavery. It then gave birth to cover-up lies, such as the distorted recollection of history that airbrushes out uncomfortable parts of it.

But there is yet another lie, which in my view is one of racism’s most effective tools. It is that a discussion of the subject is an attack on White people. Many White people get incredibly uncomfortable whenever the issue of racism is raised, often leading to the subject being shut down and not addressed. Robin Diangelo called this phenomenon ‘White fragility’.\textsuperscript{13} And it has proved to be one of racism’s most effective defences over the centuries. Sadly, each occasion that this phenomenon shuts down a discussion represents a victory for racism against all of us. We should be perceptive to detect this dynamic whenever it rears its head. Recognizing it brings us halfway towards making it lose its power. A discussion of racism is not an attack on White people because racism itself is a poison within the whole human species.

Before concluding, a brief comment is warranted about the Church’s role in all this. I, just like the paper’s author, Michael Banner, am a member of the Church of England. I have been involved in the Church’s work in the area of racial justice for over two decades. Michael Banner rightly laments the fact that the Church in general (not just the Church of England) has not provided moral leadership in this area. He has encouraged various churches to work to find creative and constructive ways forward. There is much that can be said on this, but within the limits of this article what seems most pertinent is to support that call and state my intention to continue to contribute towards that goal.

\textbf{Conclusion}

Racism continues to rage in our midst and it is our collective responsibility to defeat it. We can do so by rejecting its original lie about White supremacy; rejecting its cover-up lie that treats history in a selective, distorted way, ignoring UK’s role in the slave trade while taking credit for its abolition; and finally, rejecting racism’s strategic lie which says that to talk about it is to attack White people—a lie racism uses to perpetuate itself. With the rejection of these lies and God on our side we will defeat this evil that has blighted all our lives for so long.

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\textsuperscript{12} W.E.B. Du Bois quoted in ‘Telling Lies, Telling Tales and Telling (and Doing) the Truth’ by Michael Banner (this volume).

\textsuperscript{13} Robin Diangelo, \textit{White Fragility: Why It’s So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism} (London: Penguin, 2019).