

The Long Civil War: White Casualties and Anti-Black Racism in the US South*

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Abstract

Systematic discrimination and violence against minorities are enduring phenomena in many societies. This paper investigates the role of racist narratives in sustaining discriminatory attitudes and collective violence against the Black population in the United States South from 1865 to today. Leveraging the randomness of the Civil War excess death, we show that higher levels of sex imbalances increased the fear for racial mixing, leading to the prevalence in the newspapers of the association between “Black males” and “sexual predators.” Furthermore, higher sex-ratio imbalances increased sexually-justified lynchings and affected voting behavior and racial attitudes. This anti-Black narrative persisted even when the imbalances in the marriage market faded, shaping discrimination and collective violence until our days.

Keywords:

JEL Codes:

Systematic discrimination and violence against minorities are enduring phenomena in many societies. These practices are often justified by the belief that the targeted groups impose a social cost to be eradicated. For example, throughout early modern Europe and Colonial New England, women were tried and publicly executed for the alleged practice of witchcraft. For centuries, the story of the greedy Jew has justified recurring acts of anti-Semitic persecution. In the contemporary United States, stereotypes and misrepresentation of minorities are still prevalent in the news and political discourses ([Ash et al., 2021](#)).

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While several studies have focused on the origins and persistence of attitudes toward minorities, the mechanisms through which persistence occurs are not fully understood. In this paper, we investigate the role of racist narratives in sustaining discriminatory attitudes and collective violence, focusing on the prevalence of an enduring narrative – the “Black male rapist” – in shaping the demand for segregation and collective violence in the US South.

Consistent with recent theory (Eliaz and Spiegler, 2020; Schwartzstein and Sunderam, 2021), we propose that narratives are used as causal models to interpret reality, form beliefs, and evaluate actions. Narratives become salient when their claims are consistent with available observations, and once salient, are often used to facilitate violent collective action. Narratives facilitate collective violence in two main ways. First, because the prevalence of a particular narrative is effectively realized through recurrent exposure to information, narratives act as coordination devices, inducing correlated beliefs over the willingness to participate in collective violence and sustaining violent social norms (Campante et al., 2021). Second, narratives induce motivated beliefs to justify actions, thereby reducing the cost of violence (Bénabou and Tirole, 2016). Moreover, once narratives become salient they tend to persist through history-dependence and correlated beliefs, thus facilitating further violence beyond the original setting in which the narrative arose.

In the context of the US South, concerns over racial purity, and narratives justifying its sanctity, have been widespread since the colonial period.¹ Prior to 1865, slavery institutionalized the separation of the races and imposed *de jure* and *de facto* white domination over the Black population. With the end of the Civil War, and emancipation of the formerly enslaved, a new *de jure* equilibrium emerged, spreading fear among many white southerners over their waning power. It has been widely argued by social scientists and historians that in this environment, racial mixing posed a tangible threat to the preservation of *de facto* white power (Myrdal, 1944; Tolnay and Beck, 1995; Hodes, 1997; Wilkerson, 2020), such that in the years during and immediately following the war, white anxiety about interracial affairs between white women and Black men to rose to unprecedented levels (Hodes, 1997).²

We argue that in places where interactions between white women and Black men were more frequent after the Civil War, the narrative that racial mixing posed a threat to the Southern social order became salient. To test this claim, we first investigate how white *excess deaths* during the war, and the consequent shift in the demographic balance of white women to men, affected both the demand for segregationist policies, as well as the prevalence of a narrative in local newspapers associating Black men with rapists. Second, we present evidence on the use of this narrative to facilitate anti-Black violence, both immediately after

¹The colony of Virginia instituted the first anti-miscegenation law in 1691. By 1837, all of the states that would be eventually become the Confederacy had instituted such laws. Interracial marriage remained illegal in most Southern states until the Supreme Court ruling on *Loving v. Virginia* in 1967.

²The irony of this fear is notable given the centuries of sexual assault endured by Black women at the hands of white masters under slavery.

the war, and in later periods. Next, we investigate the channels that sustained this specific narrative by studying the impact on white women’s labor force participation, the white marriage market and racial mixing between Black men and white women. Finally, we show that the narrative survived beyond the immediate wake of the war, shaping the dynamics of discrimination and collective violence over time.

While precise death tolls do not exist, the best available estimates suggest that over 300,000 Southern men died in the Civil War (Hacker, 2011). Drawing on the method proposed by Hacker (2011) and the assumption that white women of marriage age did not migrate alone, we calculate *excess deaths* by computing the change in the white female-to-male sex ratio at the county level for ages 15 to 34. We show that by this measure the white casualty rate induced a decrease of 14 men per 100 women in the average county, which is balanced with respect to white sex ratios in 1840–1860.

We argue that this measure cleanly captures *excess deaths* and the consequent sex imbalance between white women and men for two main reasons. First, because over two-thirds of casualties resulted from non-combat causes, such as disease (Neely, 2007), and because most of the battles took place in the Border states,³ measures of excess death in the South are not correlated with deadly and traumatic events or destruction of physical capital that could affect local outcomes independently of white sex imbalances. Second, we show that our measure is uncorrelated with pre-war county-level observables that explain post-war attitudes toward Black people, political outcomes, and prevalence of collective violence, indicating that this measure is as good as random in our setting.

Exploiting these variations in the war-induced white sex imbalance, we study the immediate and long-term effects on the prevalence of anti-Black narratives, demand for segregation, and collective violence. In our hypothesis, a high excess death rate increased white women’s contact with Black men by affecting the nature of women’s economic roles, as well as marriage patterns (Faust, 1996). During and after the war, white women from all socio-economic backgrounds were forced to take up economic enterprises outside of the home, while extensive casualties of white men led to a generation of widowed or single white women. As young white women faced the changes in their domestic life, widespread conjecture about the possibility of interracial liaisons emerged (Faust, 1996; Hodes, 1997); and in some places, as our evidence suggests, such liaisons occurred. We argue that this observable transformation of the social landscape increased the *fitness* of a narrative that connected the freedom of newly emancipated Black men to engage with white women to the loss of white men’s *de facto* power. Variation in the *fitness* of this narrative increased its prevalence, as well as the demand for segregation as a way to prevent the loss of white men’s *de facto* power by severing the link between Black men’s freedom and racial mixing. An extreme expression of the demand for segregation occurred through lynchings, often justified by the

³With the notable exception of the Sherman March.

beliefs/stereotype of the Black male as a sexual predator.

Moreover, we propose that, while greater white sex imbalances have a direct effect on both the fitness of a narrative and associated actions, narratives tend to persist and may continue to affect behavior long after the shock subsides. To test this hypothesis, we collect three main sets of information. First, we leverage information on voting behavior in favor of the Democratic party from 1852 to 2018, exploiting the party’s shift toward a Civil Rights platform in the mid-20th century, to identify political behavior motivated by racial attitudes (?). Second, we construct a measure of *narrative prevalence* by building and analyzing a new database of local newspaper content, including the political affiliation and geolocation of each paper, ranging from 1860 to 1900 (soon to be expanded to 1850–1930). Finally, we construct a novel database of lynchings ranging from 1865 to 1881, digitizing information from newspapers from the period. We combine this information with publicly available data on lynchings from 1882 to 1930 from the Historical American Lynching Data Collection Project (Project HAL) to examine the dynamics of racial violence in the US South over 65 years. We specifically code whether the reason for the lynching was an alleged sexual offense or other offense, as well as the race of the victim, to understand how the narrative is used to facilitate collective violence.

With these data at hand, we first analyze the effect of *excess deaths* on voting behavior in favor of the Democratic party. We find that since the end of Reconstruction, when the Democratic party reestablished its racist platform after the Civil War, *excess deaths* are strongly correlated with a higher vote share in favor of the Democratic party. The relationship declines in correspondence with the shift in party platform away from segregation policies, suggesting that the white casualty shock sustained during the war had a lasting effect on the demand for segregation.

Second, we show that the association in local newspapers between “Black males” and “rapists” becomes prevalent in counties with a greater shock to white sex ratio. Our results show that with a standard deviation increase in war-induced sex imbalances, newspapers affiliated with the Democratic party — the party that represented slave-owners’ interests prior to the war and segregationist policies after the war — increase the share of issues associating Black males to rapists by 20%,⁴ with effects persisting beyond the initial wake of the war. Our measure is the share of issues in which at least one article mentions the word “Negro” and the word “rape/rapist” within ten words from each other. We find no effect on the use of “rape” alone, “lynch”, “negro” and several other words. We interpret these results to suggest that the white sex imbalance induced an increase in the demand for a narrative linking the emancipation of Black people to the loss of white *de facto* power, specifically pointing to racial mixing as a causal channel of this loss and proposing a rationalization of violence based on the belief that Black men are rapists.

⁴Compared to the non-affiliated newspapers.

We then study the use of this narrative to justify racial violence by investigating the effect white sex imbalances on lynchings of Black men for alleged sexual offenses against white women. We find that both during Reconstruction and throughout the Jim Crow era, the impact of white sex imbalances on anti-Black violence is justified entirely by the notion that Black men are sexual predators. In the initial wake of the war, from 1865 to 1877, the impact is highest, where a standard deviation increase in the white sex imbalance corresponds to a 35 percent increase in the likelihood of a lynching for a sexual offense in a given year. The effect persists throughout the Jim Crow era, where a standard deviation in the war-induced sex imbalance corresponds to a 9.5 percent increase in the likelihood of a sexual lynching. Importantly, we find no effect of sex imbalances on lynchings for other offenses, such as murder, labor disputes, or political reasons. Moreover, there is no impact on lynchings of white men for sexual or other offenses, nor do we see changes in other types of violence, such as executions performed by the criminal system. These findings suggest that the results are specifically associated with the increased *fitness* of the anti-Black narrative in places where the white casualty shock occurred.

Finally, we analyze the narrative as a channel of persistence. We first investigate the effect of new and unrelated shocks over time on the likelihood of sexual vs. non-sexual lynchings. Leveraging the historical literature, we exploit the fact that economic downturns in the cotton economy are associated with increased conflict between Black and white laborers, often resulting in lynchings (Tolnay and Beck (1995); Christian, 2017). Because economic shocks occur independently of the historical exposure to white sex imbalances, this variation allows us to investigate the interaction between the two effects. We find that economic shocks induce lynchings for sexual offenses only when associated with the historical sex ratio imbalances. Shocks to crops other than cotton do not affect lynchings. Moreover, we show long-term effects on contemporary racial attitudes of white southerners as measured by responses in the Implicit Association Test for racial bias. We find an effect in those responses specifically related to the underlying narrative: the association between Black males and violence, as well as attitudes toward interracial sex.

How did the narrative become prevalent, and why did it persist? We find results consistent with the hypothesis that *excess deaths* induced a change in the white marriage market that affected the fear of racial mixing among the white population. First, we find that, consistent with predictions from a standard marriage market model, there is a reduction the share of white men who are unmarried after the war in places with greater *excess deaths*, which persists over several decades. We also find an increase in white women’s labor force participation, the share of unmarried and widowed white women, single white mothers, and an increase in racial mixing between white women and Black men. This last effect is measured by an increase in the number of white mothers enumerated in the census with a Black child, as well as the prevalence of white women with Black spouses. Finally, we investigate

several potentially alternative and complementary mechanisms. In particular, we show that patterns of migration are inconsistent with the dynamics of the main results, while trends in income across races might have increased demand for anti-Black narratives.

In the last section, we run a battery of robustness. First, we run specifications including controls of important predictors of lynchings, as the occupation of the Union Army of southern counties and the location of refugees camps. Second, we show placebo tests using changes in the white sex ratio for individuals who would be too old for conscription or the marriage market (older than 45) and show that these have no effect on lynchings of any type, nor do changes in the ratio of old to young white women. Finally, we control for economic changes driven by the war and show that controlling for these does not alter the qualitative interpretation of our main results.

We contribute to several strands of the literature. First, by investigating the role of anti-Black narratives in the dynamic of racial attitudes and political preference, we are part of a growing literature studying the role of narratives and rationalizing beliefs as determinants of behavior (Akerlof and Snower, 2016; Bénabou, 2013; Shiller, 2017; Bénabou et al., 2018; Cantoni et al., 2017; Eliaz and Spiegler, 2020; Schwartzstein and Sunderam, 2021; Esposito et al., 2021; Bursztyn et al., 2020).

Our paper is closely connected to the literature on media effects on political preferences, attitudes and beliefs (DellaVigna and Kaplan (2007); Enikolopov et al., 2011; DellaVigna et al., 2014; Adena et al., 2015; Martin and Yurukoglu, 2017, Blouin and Mukand, 2019; Wang, 2021) and social capital and collective action (Gentzkow, 2006; Gentzkow et al., 2011; Yanagizawa-Drott, 2014; Campante et al., 2018). While this strand of the literature looks at the effect of information consumption and exposure, other works highlight the importance of demand for likeminded views in determining media slant (e.g. Gentzkow and Shapiro, 2010). We contribute to this literature by analyzing how changes in observable conditions affect the demand for specific narratives that rationalize observations and justify behavior.

By analyzing racial violence and demand for segregation, we also connect to the literature studying collective violence and minority persecution (Becker and Pascali, 2019; Grosfeld et al., 2019; Jha, 2013). In particular, we are related to the historical and sociological literature on the determinants of lynchings and racial segregation in the United States. This work, empirically led by sociologists, has focused on the role of economic competition (Raper, 1933; Blalock, 1967; Tolnay and Beck, 1995; Christian, 2017), political suppression (Hagen et al., 2013; Beck et al., 2016; Jones et al., 2017; Logan, 2019; Williams, 2020), the maintenance of social boundaries (Price et al., 2008; Bailey et al., 2011; Smangs, 2016), segregation (Cook et al., 2018a,b), and paternalism (Alston and Ferrie, 1999). We contribute to this literature by studying the role played by the narrative induced-belief of the “black male as a rapist” in determining lynchings and political preferences. Our analysis conceptually develops and empirically tests the psychosexual hypothesis discussed in the historical

and economic literature (Williamson, 1984, 1997; Hodes, 1993, 1997; Christian, 2017) and provide a long-term perspective on political behavior and preference for racial segregation.

Our results also contribute to the understanding of the political legacy of slavery (Nunn, 2008; Acharya et al., 2016; Ramos-Toro, 2021) and more in general of long-term persistence of economic events (Voigtländer and Voth, 2012, Guiso et al., 2016, Becker et al., 2016). We contribute to the recent debate on the mechanisms of persistence, expanding the recent focus on activation (Cantoni et al., 2019; Fouka and Voth, 2021) to incorporate the notion of narratives as a mechanism persistently shaping attitudes.

Finally, we contribute to the literature studying the consequences of demographic shocks on economic outcomes. Several studies have looked at the short and long term effect of sex imbalances on female labor force participation (Goldin, 1991; Teso, 2019; Boehnke and Gay, 2020), fertility (Doepke et al., 2015), marriage market (Abramitzky et al., 2011) and gender norms (Grosjean and Khattar, 2019). Few works focus on the effect of missing white men on minorities' outcomes (Ferrara, 2020). We contribute to this literature by analyzing how shocks to sex imbalances can change racial attitudes by shaping interactions between women and minorities. Consistent with our hypothesis, a recent study, Dancygier et al. (2020), finds supportive evidence for a link between hate crime against refugees in Germany and competition in the marriage market.

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