



A Critique of “*The Birth of a Nation*: Media and Racial Hate”

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The Birth of a Nation by D. W. Griffith was widely hailed as a major innovation in filmmaking and was placed on the National Society of Film Critics’ influential list of *100 Essential Films* (Carr 2002). Dave Kehr, a prominent movie critic, wrote the following in 2011 in the *New York Times* about the film:

A motion picture of unprecedented scale, ambition and formal assurance, “The Birth of a Nation” was the first to open at a legitimate theater on Broadway (the Liberty, absorbed not long ago into the franchised chaos of 42nd Street) with reserved seats, a 40-piece orchestra and an appropriately elevated ticket price: a shockingly high \$2, at a time when a typical admission charge was 15 cents. (Kehr 2011).

The Birth of a Nation was first shown in 1915. There were showings of the film across the country between 1915 and 1919 and then again during the 1920s and during the 1930s when sound was added to the film. The 1915 to 1919 showings of the film were a huge commercial success, with millions of viewers.

The Birth of a Nation has also been widely reviled for its racism, glorification of the Ku Klux Klan’s activities during the period of Reconstruction, and inaccurate history (Franklin 1979; Rogin 1985; Staiger 1992). Interestingly, at the same time *The Birth of a Nation* was being staged, there was a rebirth of the Ku Klux Klan in 1915, and this incarnation of the Klan is referred to as the second Ku Klux Klan to distinguish it from its Reconstruction Era counterpart (Mecklin 1924).

In a recent article in the *American Economic Review*, Desmond Ang (2023)

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combines these two facts to derive and test the hypothesis that screenings of *The Birth of a Nation* between 1915 and 1919 was a cause of the rise of the second Ku Klux Klan. Ang (2023, 1428) claims to provide causal evidence that the screening of the film *The Birth of a Nation* in a county between 1915 and 1919 is associated with:

1. an increase in the probability that a county had a lynching or race riot in months after the screening;
2. whether a county had a chapter ('klavern') of the second Klan before 1930; and
3. whether a county was home to a number of hate groups and was the site of hate crimes in the first two decades of the 21st century, approximately 80 years after the film was screened.

In this article I evaluate the validity of the three claims enumerated above. An important reason for doing so is that scholarly claims about things like film screenings causing hate crimes could provide support for laws or policies that restrict speech and repress voluntary association. Ang (2023, 1428) writes that research "examining political media has documented the persuasive effects of radio propaganda and slanted news on racist, nationalist, and xenophobic sentiments... This paper [demonstrates] the socially harmful spillovers of entertainment media." If Ang were soundly to demonstrate harmful effects of cultural activity, such as film, that could be useful knowledge, although whether evidence from a film shown in 1915 would be applicable to today is questionable. But we should be concerned about such research claims being used to breach our sacred regard for the freedom of speech, the press, expression, and so on. Ronald Coase (1974) worried that the freedom of speech and expression could be assaulted using the kit of 'market failure' arguments used to assault freedom of trade and association. An allegiance to free speech does not deny that a book or movie can be bad for humankind. Rather, such allegiance is based on the fallibility and potential abuse of censors; the need to instill a toleration for disagreement, and the art of testing, challenging, and correcting bad speech with good speech. Coase teaches us to take responsibility for "the total effect" (Coase 1960, 2, 43–44) of a supposed fix to a problem. If you recognize that free speech sometimes goes wrong, recognize too that restricting speech sometimes goes wrong. The upshot of this discussion is that evidence purportedly demonstrating harms of free expression should be highly scrutinized, which is the purpose of this article.

To assess Ang's (2023) claims, I first review the historical scholarship documenting the causes of the rise and fall of second Klan to dispute Ang's claim that screenings of *The Birth of a Nation* between 1915 and 1919 caused the explosive

growth and equally dramatic decline of Klan in the 1920s (see Figure 1 in Ang 2023). Second, I evaluate the validity of Ang's empirical evidence on the effect of screenings of *The Birth of a Nation* between 1915 and 1919 on the rise of the Klan and the extent of hate crime in the first two decades of the 21st century. Finally, I critically review Ang's empirical analyses underlying his claim that screenings of *The Birth of a Nation* between 1915 and 1919 caused an increase in lynchings and race riots in the months after screenings.

Overall, I conclude, firstly, the extensive scholarly analysis that had already addressed the rapid rise (1919–1924) and rapid fall (1925–1927) of the second KKK already provides highly satisfactory explanations of the episode. Second, Ang's empirical analysis is ill-conceived and poorly executed, leading him to make unsupported and misleading claims about the role of *The Birth of a Nation* in the revival of the second Klan. The same faulty empirical framework invalidates Ang's conclusion that screenings of *The Birth of a Nation* between 1915 and 1919 had a persistent effect manifesting in a higher probability of having a Klan chapter in 1960 (the third incarnation of the Klan) and more hate crimes in the new millennium. I also conclude that Ang's evidence related to the effect of screenings of *The Birth of a Nation* between 1915 and 1919 on lynchings and race riots is based on low-quality data and analyses that lacked sufficient statistical power to be informative.

As described in a body of substantial and compelling historical analysis, the rise of the second Klan from 1919 to 1924 was the result of extensive recruiting activities that exploited existing racial hatred, anti-Catholic sentiment, and xenophobia. The historical record also makes clear that *The Birth of a Nation's* role in the Ku Klux Klan was as a propaganda tool that had minimal effect on Klan membership between 1915 and 1919. Given that minimal effect between 1915 and 1919, the scientific plausibility motivating Ang's empirical analysis is weak, which underscores the need to thoroughly assess the validity of the evidence suggesting a causal link between screenings of *The Birth of a Nation* and the growth in second Klan membership.

The historical scholarship

The historiography on the origin and growth of the second Ku Klux Klan is rich and extensive (see, among others, Mecklin 1924; Jackson 1992; MacLean 1994; Stokes 2007; Rice 2008; Weinberger 2011; Gordon 2017; Hernandez 2019). It is well documented, for example, that William Joseph Simmons, who was the founder of the second Klan in 1915, had long planned a revival of the Klan and that he was independently reviving the Klan prior to the screening of *The Birth of a Nation* in Atlanta in 1915. Here is John Mecklin (1924) describing Simmons:

Colonel William Joseph Simmons, the founder of the modern Klan, tells us that for twenty years he had given thought to the creation of an order standing for a comprehensive Americanism that would blot out the Mason and Dixon's Line. Fascinated as he was from boyhood by the romantic story of the old Klan of Reconstruction days, which is looked upon in the South as the savior of Southern civilization, he called the new order the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan. (Mecklin 1924, 20)

Simmons had applied for a state charter in October of 1915 and organized a meeting on Stone Mountain on Thanksgiving in 1915 to create the second Klan (Bernstein 2023). Simmons used the screening of *The Birth of a Nation* in Atlanta on December 6, 1915, to glorify his vision of the Klan. By the end of the run of the film in Atlanta, the Atlanta Klan had 92 members (ibid., 178). Mecklin (1924, 21) writes: "For five years the Klan seems to have passed an uneventful existence, spreading very slowly and making no great impression upon the country." Similarly, Melvyn Stokes (2007, 234–35) notes: "the really rapid growth of the Klan did not occur in the early years when *The Birth of a Nation* was at the peak of its influence and availability. By 1919, the Klan had only a few thousand members. Not until the summer of 1920, with the hiring of publicity agents Edward Young Clarke and Mrs. Elizabeth Tyler, did the real expansion of the Klan begin."

The outsized role of Clarke and Tyler in growing Klan membership is discussed in many works (Mecklin 1924; MacLean 1994; Rice 2008; Fryer and Levitt 2012; Gordon 2017). Indeed, Tom Rice (2008) documents how the Klan used Klan-owned newspapers (e.g., *Fiery Cross*, *The Watcher on the Tower*), Klan-produced films (*The Traitor Within* and *Toll of Justice*), and other films (*The Face at Your Window*) to recruit members. These media activities were undertaken during the early 1920s and coincide with the dramatic increase in Klan membership between 1919 and 1924. A notable media event that historians point to as a cause of the Klan's national expansion was the exposé of Klan activities published in the *New York World* in 1921 (Chalmers 1965; Jackson 1992; Lay 1992; MacLean 1994; Stokes 2007; Kneebone 2015). The *New York World* published twenty-one articles on consecutive days detailing Klan activities, and these articles were distributed by major newspapers across the country (e.g., the *Boston Globe*, *Plain Dealer*, *Houston Chronicle*, and *Seattle Times*). These articles resulted in Congressional hearings in which Simmons testified and brought attention to the Klan nationally, which facilitated Klan expansion.

Arguably, the most important cause of the growth in Klan membership was the Kleagles, or recruiters, that were enlisted by Clarke (Jackson 1992; MacLean 1994; Rice 2008). By 1921, there were 200 Kleagles around the country who were on a commission that allowed them to keep \$4 of the \$10 membership fee (Jackson 1992; Hernandez 2019). Clarke himself was paid \$2.50 for each recruit and repor-

tedly made \$30,000 some weeks (Jackson 1992). It was during this period and largely because of the Kleagles and the other organizing activities of the Klan that Klan membership and chapters expanded.

The rapid decline in Klan membership came after 1924, collapsing nearly to zero by 1928. The historical scholarship is, again, clear (Jackson 1992; Stokes 2007; Pegram 2011; Gordon 2017; Hernandez 2019). According to these historians, the decline in membership was due to the fratricidal struggles among the Klan leadership, revelations about the organization's financial irregularities, and high-profile criminal cases such as the prosecution of Klan members in Louisiana for the Mer Rouge murders, the *New York World's* exposure of the arrest of Clarke and Tyler for possession of alcohol during Prohibition, and the arrest of prominent Klan leader David Stephenson for rape and murder. Denunciation and mockery by opinion leaders such as H. L. Mencken (1924) no doubt also spurred the decline.

In short, screenings of *The Birth of a Nation* between 1915 and 1919 are not part of the traditional historiography of the rise and fall of the second Klan. If anything, showings of the film during its second run in the 1920s may have been used as a tool or mediator by Klan organizers (Simcovitch 1972; MacLean 1994; Stokes 2007; Rice 2008). John Hope Franklin writes: "Thus, Birth of a Nation was the midwife in the rebirth of the most vicious terrorist organization in the history of the United States" (1979, 431). Franklin's reference to a "midwife" is notable because it highlights the fact that *The Birth of a Nation* was a recruiting device of Klan organizing activities—i.e., a tool used by the Klan leadership. Even this characterization, however, does not apply to screenings between 1915 and 1919.

Did screenings of *The Birth of a Nation* between 1915 and 1919 increase Ku Klux Klan membership?

Ang (2023) does not articulate the explanations of the second Klan's rapid rise and decline as found in the traditional historiography on the subject. He therefore neither integrates his emphasis on 1915–1919 screenings of *The Birth of a Nation* as a cause of the second KKK with traditional explanations, nor compares the persuasiveness of his explanation against the traditional explanations. This, perhaps, is not that surprising given the formulaic style that has come to dominate articles published in the American Economic Association (AEA) journals. The AEA style eschews critical literature reviews in favor of two or three paragraphs that mention how a study is related to other studies, even studies only tangentially related. For example, Ang (2023) simply references studies in "media economics"

such as a study of Fox news on voting (DellaVigna and Kaplan 2007) or how Serbian radio affected the presence of anti-Serbian graffiti in Croatian towns (DellaVigna et al. 2014). He does not discuss why these studies are relevant to the study of the rise and fall of the second Klan in the 1920s.

Instead of utilizing the extensive literature on the rise and fall of the second Klan, Ang (2023) argues that his study was necessary to address the lack of “causal evidence” on the relationship between screenings of *The Birth of a Nation* between 1915 and 1919 and the origin and growth of the second Klan. The claim that there is a lack of “causal evidence” supposes that there is a widely held view that local screenings were causal. This is not the case, although it is widely noted that the film’s depiction of the Klan influenced Klan’s behavior (e.g., the wearing of white robes) and that it was used by the Klan in its propaganda (Simcovitch 1972; MacLean 1994; Stokes 2007; Rice 2008). As such, it is a mediator between Klan organizers and leadership and Klan membership. Further, “causal evidence” here seems to mean evidence produced using econometric methods. Ang (2023) obtained estimates of the correlation between whether there was a screening of *The Birth of a Nation* in a county between 1915 and 1919 and the probability that a county had a chapter of the second Ku Klux Klan before 1930. Let me reiterate that by 1930 Klan chapters had all but disappeared entirely, so Ang’s dependent variable here is about the county in 1930 *having had* a chapter.

The disconnect between historical explanations of the rise and fall of Klan membership between 1919 and 1927 and Ang’s analysis, with its dependent variable anchored in 1930, is obvious. The motivation for Ang’s analysis is indicated in this passage: “the movie’s staggered and incomplete distribution provide an ideal setting for hypothesis testing” (Ang 2023, 1425). In short, Ang (2023) found what, to him, looked like a natural experiment that could be exploited using methods that would appeal to economist reviewers who value empirical analysis over wide-ranging historical scholarship, even when the scientific plausibility of the empirical analysis is questionable, as in this case. What’s more, despite saying that he had found “an ideal setting for hypothesis testing,” Ang’s analyses of the presence of a Klan chapter by 1930 and the extent of hate crimes in the new millennium do not, in fact, exploit the “staggered” screenings of *The Birth of a Nation*.

Ang is well aware that he faces a causality problem: It could well be that, rather than screenings being the cause of the rebirth of the Klan, there is another set of variables that causes both screenings and the probability of ever having a chapter of the second Klan by 1930. To obtain estimates of the association between the screening of *The Birth of a Nation* between 1915 and 1919 in a county and the probability that a county had a chapter of the second Klan before 1930, Ang (2023) used regression methods using county-level data. The key independent variable is on dates and location of screenings of *The Birth of a Nation*. Ang (2023, 1433)

describes the collecting of the data: “I collected data on newspaper advertisements for screenings of the movie from three online repositories of digitized historical newspapers... To supplement the newspaper data, research assistants also searched for “Birth of a Nation” in digitized copies of the *Moving Picture World* from 1915 to 1919.” Note that screenings that were unadvertised in a newspaper, or in a county without a newspaper, went unrecorded, which is a point I return to shortly.

Ang (2023) regressed an indicator for whether a county had had a Klan chapter by 1930 on an indicator for whether the county had a screening of *The Birth of a Nation* between 1915 and 1919. This analysis does not exploit the staggered screenings of the film because there were no Klan chapters prior to 1915. In its place, to address the causality problem, Ang (2023) uses an instrumental variable approach in which, instead of the actual screening of *The Birth of a Nation* in a county, he uses a *predicted probability* that there was a screening in a county. Ang predicted the probability that a county had a screening between 1915 to 1919 conditioned on whether a county had a theater in 1914, thus creating two sets of counties, namely, those with a theater as of 1914 and those without a theater. Supposing that a screening of *The Birth of a Nation* could only occur if a county had a theater,² the presence of a theater in a county by 1914 was strongly correlated with whether a county had a screening.

The validity of the instrumental-variables (IV) approach depends on whether there were other unmeasured factors associated with whether a county had a theater in 1914 that would also influence Klan membership and chapter formation. For example, given that counties with a theater in 1914 were relatively large and urban (Table 1 in Ang 2023), Klan organizing activities such as Kleagle recruiting efforts may have been focused on these counties. However, any number of unmeasured factors that differed by whether a county had a theater in 1914, such as socioeconomic status, could also affect Klan membership and chapter formation.

2. Ang (2023) seems to presuppose that a screening required a theater, but does not speak to whether some of the 1915–1919 newspaper advertisements of screenings were for screenings in locations in, for example, auditoriums, common rooms, etc., of schools, churches, lodges, civic centers, commercial buildings, and so on. A cursory search of the Newspaper.com website of historical newspapers turns up examples such as the *News & Observer* (Raleigh, N.C.), Nov. 12, 1915, p. 4, which reports a screening at the Academy of Music (not a conventional movie theater but instead an opera house); the Majestic Theater in La Crosse, Wis., was a vaudeville house when it screened *Birth of a Nation* (*La Crosse Tribune*, Nov. 12, 1915, p. 16); the Tremont Theater in Boston which showed the film 252 times in 1915 was a legitimate theater until 1947; the Victoria Theater in Dayton, Ohio, which had showings in 1917 was a legitimate theater that did not convert to full-time movie exhibition until 1930; the film’s run in Charlotte, N.C. was at the City Auditorium, a venue which “gave Charlotte a lofty space and 4,500 seats for all manner of civic gatherings from basketball to band concerts by John Philip Sousa and arias by tenor Enrico Caruso.” And as mentioned earlier, screenings that were not advertised would be missed. The resultant measurement error in screenings is likely to have an effect. Indeed, estimates in Ang’s Appendix Table A.3 show that alternative measures of screenings have a large effect on estimates, for example by a factor of 215 percent.

In fact, in Table 1 below, I show that counties with and without a theater in 1914 differed in several ways that are plausibly related to Klan membership (e.g., literacy rates).

We know that Klan members were more likely than the general population to be professionals, be Protestant, and of course be white (Fryer and Levitt 2012; Mecklin 1924). It is possible that some measure of diversity within the local population would provide salient scapegoats, inflame passions, and make Klan chapter formation more likely. My point is not to speculate on true factors, but simply to highlight the difficulty of trying to tease out, statistically, whether a variable like percentage Protestant or percentage white matters to Klan-chapter formation and other dependent variables.

Ang (2023) provides what he claimed was evidence against the possibility that theater counties were in some relevant way different than non-theater counties. First, he shows that a few demographic characteristics (e.g., black population in 1860) and political characteristics (Democratic vote share in 2012) prior to 1914 do not differ between counties with and without a theater in 1914, which was the predictor (i.e., instrument) for whether there was a screening of *The Birth of a Nation* between 1915 and 1919. This is a very limited assessment, as Ang himself acknowledges (2023, 1441). Ang examined only a few characteristics that are not particularly intuitive causes of Klan membership.

Second, Ang (2023) examined whether the presence of a theater in a county in Kansas, which banned the film, was associated with the probability of having had a Klan chapter by 1930 in that county. Standard errors from this analysis are so large as to make the entire analysis uninformative. For example, estimates suggest that the presence of a theater in a county in Kansas is associated with a 40 percent lower probability of having a Klan chapter, which is about the same magnitude, although opposite signed, as the estimate of the effect of having a theater on the probability of having a Klan chapter in counties outside Kansas. Despite the large magnitude of the estimate for Kansas, which suggests a faulty research design, it was statistically insignificant because of the lack of statistical power. In short, this analysis is severely under-powered, and unpersuasive.

The third piece of evidence Ang presents is an analysis correlating the year a theater opened in a county and the probability of having had a Klan chapter in that county by 1930. Ang (2023, Figure 5) reported that only if a theater opened before 1919 was there a higher probability of having had a Klan chapter by 1930. This simply shows that probability of having had a Klan chapter by 1930 is higher in counties that opened a theater earlier with, unintuitively, counties opening a theater prior to 1907 having the highest probability of having had a Klan chapter by 1930. The question as to why there was a non-trivial relationship between the year a theater opened in a county and the probability of having a Klan chapter by

1930 was unaddressed by Ang despite its bearing on the validity of the instrumental variables approach. There is no direct reason for the probability of having a Klan chapter by 1930 to be higher in counties with a theater by 1906 than counties that had a theater in 1914. The fact that there is such a relationship strongly suggests that *unmeasured influences* associated with both the year a county had a theater and the probability of having a Klan chapter by 1930 are present. The same problem with the main analysis examining the association between the presence of a theater by 1914 and a Klan chapter prior to 1930 plagues this analysis—counties that have a theater, or a theater by a given year, are likely to differ, for example, be exposed differentially to all the Klan’s early-1920s organizing activities.

Ang (2023) also conducted what he terms a placebo analysis in which he obtained the association between screenings of the 1918 film *Mickey* in a county between 1915 and 1919 and the probability that a county had had a Klan chapter by 1930. The expectation is that the placebo treatment—i.e., screening of *Mickey*—will not have an effect. Contrary to this expectation, Ang’s results (Online Appendix Table A.IX) from the exact same IV approach used for *The Birth of a Nation* indicate that screenings of *Mickey* between 1915 and 1919 in a county was associated with a large increase in the probability that a county in 1930 had had a Klan chapter. The magnitude of association was almost identical to that obtained for screenings of *The Birth of a Nation*. This suggests that a study focusing on theater screenings of *Mickey* and the rise of the second Klan would have led to the conclusion that *Mickey* caused the revival of the Klan—i.e., similar “causal evidence” underlying his claim about *The Birth of a Nation*. Yet, Ang (2023, 1452) comes to precisely the opposite conclusion of what the data show: “These results provide further confidence that differences in Klan support are not driven by unobserved factors correlated with theater locations or the arrival of popular movies more generally, but rather by *The Birth of a Nation*’s specific racist influence.” It is surprising that this damning evidence was glossed this way by Ang. Equally surprising is that this clear evidence of an invalid research design withstood editorial scrutiny.³

3. Ang (2023, 1451–1452) writes: “I perform placebo tests using screenings of *Mickey*, the most widely seen movie of the era. Online Appendix Table A.IX shows that while areas that screened *Mickey* were more likely to have a klavern in the future, this is due to the large overlap in distribution areas of the two films. Roughly 50 percent of counties that screened *Mickey* also screened *The Birth of a Nation*. Controlling for *The Birth of a Nation* screenings, the effect of *Mickey* showings is near zero and insignificant. Similarly, *Mickey* showings are not associated with increased Klan presence in Kansas (where *The Birth of a Nation* was banned) or in other counties where *The Birth of a Nation* was not shown. This is true for both OLS and IV models. These results provide further confidence that differences in Klan support are not driven by unobserved factors correlated with theater locations or the arrival of popular movies more generally, but rather by the *The Birth of a Nation*’s specific racist influence.” Ang (2023, 1451) claims that screening of *Mickey* was as strongly associated with whether a county had had a Klan chapter by 1930 as was screening of

There are many other placebos that can be used, and I tried some on the dependent-variable side of the equation, that is, whether the presence of a theater in 1914 is correlated with an outcome in 1930 that is clearly not caused by the presence of a theater, or the screening of a film *The Birth of a Nation* (or *Mickey*). I selected a sample of all males between the ages of 21 and 64 from the 1930 Census (5% sample). I then aggregated the data to the county level, and for each county I calculated the proportion of the sample that worked; was illiterate; owned a house; had a radio in the house; and among workers, the proportion that were self-employed. For each outcome, I estimated a reduced-form model almost identical to the one in Ang’s Table 4. Specifically, I obtained estimates of the association between whether a county had a theater in 1914 and the outcomes just described using one of the same models as Ang (2023).⁴ Table 1 presents the estimates.

TABLE 1. Estimates of the association between having a theater in 1914 and socioeconomic outcomes

| | Worked | Illiterate | Owned a house | Had radio | Self-employed |
|---|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|--------------------|---------------------|
| Reduced form, any theater in 1914 | -0.021** (0.002) | -0.009** (0.002) | -0.017** (0.004) | 0.050** (0.004) | -0.096** (0.006) |
| IV=(Reduced form/0.277) (First stage=0.277 taken from Ang (2023, Table 3 Col. 2)) | -0.076 | -0.032 | -0.061 | 0.180 | -0.347 |
| Mean of dep. variable in control counties | 0.93 | 0.09 | 0.49 | 0.18 | 0.53 |
| Number of observations = 3,075 | | | | | |
| <i>Notes:</i> Estimates are from a model that includes all the variables in the model used by Ang (2023, Table 3 Col. 2). The implied IV estimate is equal to the reduced-form estimate shown in the first row of the table divided by the first-stage estimate of the effect of having a theater in 1914 on whether <i>The Birth of a Nation</i> was screened in that county between 1915 and 1919, which is taken directly from Ang’s Table 3 Column 2. Standard errors are in parentheses. Standard errors were constructed using robust-cluster methods with clustering on the county. ** indicates p-value<0.05. | | | | | |

Estimates in Table 1 provide consistent and strong evidence that the IV approach of Ang (2023) is invalid. For every outcome measured in 1930, estimates

Birth because approximately half the counties that screened *Mickey* also screened *Birth*. This argument does not refute the damning evidence that screenings of *Mickey* were strongly associated with the probability that a county had a Klan chapter by 1930. Instead, Ang’s defense illustrates that the analysis is not informative or useful as a placebo because it is infeasible to separate the two relevant statistical associations (namely, the association of *Mickey* with the probability that a county had had a Klan chapter by 1930 and the association of *Birth* with the probability that a county ever had a Klan chapter by 1930). Further, as already discussed, evidence from Kansas is unpersuasive because the analysis is so lacking in statistical power that it is unable to reject huge associations and is therefore uninformative.

4. I used the data provided by Ang (2023), which allowed me to estimate a model that is identical to that in column 2 of Table 3 and includes: state fixed effects and the county level controls included by Ang (2023): a quadratic of total population, population density, Black population, Black population share, US-born population share, and the share of individuals who would have been of draft-eligible age during World War I. These data were made available by Ang (2023).

of the association between whether a county had a theater in 1914 and the outcome are statistically significant.⁵ Implied IV estimates, which are estimates of the effect of a screening of *The Birth of a Nation* on these outcomes, suggest that some of the effects are quite large. For example, IV estimates indicate that the screening of a *The Birth of a Nation* in a county is associated with a 3.2 percentage-point, or approximately 33 percent, lower probability of being illiterate. The IV estimate for whether a person owned a house indicates that the screening of *The Birth of a Nation* in a county is associated with a 6.1 percentage-point, or approximately 12 percent, lower probability of owning a house. As there is no plausible reason why a screening of *The Birth of a Nation* would cause any of the outcomes in Table 1 (e.g., home ownership), the statistically significant estimates are compelling evidence of a faulty research design. Counties with a theater in 1914 are different from those without a theater in 1914 and these differences cause differences in a range of outcomes in 1930. The same factors that cause home ownership, work, and literacy to differ are also likely to influence Klan membership and chapter formation. Therefore, besides the compelling historical scholarship undermining Ang's claim that screenings of *The Birth of a Nation* caused the rise and fall of the second KKK, Ang's claim is further undermined because of a clearly flawed empirical analysis.

More doubt about the soundness of Ang's conclusions comes from assessing mechanisms that he highlights purportedly linking the screening of *The Birth of a Nation* in a county between 1915 and 1919 to the rapid growth and equally rapid demise of the Ku Klux Klan between 1919 and 1927. Any mechanism would have to explain both the rise and fall of the Klan membership. Ang (2023) mentions a few possible mechanisms. For example, Ang (2023) reported (Appendix Figure A.XXI) that there was an increase in boys named Benjamin—the protagonist of *The Birth of a Nation*—in the decade between 1915 and 1925 versus 1900 to 1904. Why this is evidence of “media imitation” (Ang 2023, 1452) that can explain the rapid rise and demise of the Ku Klux Klan remains elusive to this writer. Moreover, there is no statistical difference in the proportion of boys named Benjamin between 1910–1914, 1915–1919, 1920–1924 and 1925–1929 that would reflect some unstated and not obvious linkage between child naming and Ku Klux Klan membership.

Another mechanism mentioned by Ang (2023) is that *The Birth of a Nation* changed racial attitudes. Given the widespread and open racism at the time it seems unlikely that this mechanism was the link between the film and rise of the second Klan. Rather, it is far more believable that *The Birth of a Nation* was one of many representational forms that reinforced existing racial stereotypes, such that its

5. Estimates using county population as weights are qualitatively similar and always statistically significant, although magnitudes differed moderately. Ang (2023) did not weight by county population in his analysis.

general adherence to dominant cultural ideas rendered its impact minimal. The following quote summarizes the historical view on this issue:

What *Moving Picture World's* reviewer W. Stephen Bush called the film's 'undisguised appeal to race prejudices' was in itself unexceptional in a society which asserted racial difference as an absolute marker of identity and in which 'the figure of the depraved black criminal assumed a prominence in newspapers, fiction, plays, songs, and early films far out of proportion to his actual numbers.' Racial caricature pervaded middle-class white culture, from its advertising and its food packaging to its comics, drug store postcards and children's books, toys and games. 'Everywhere', notes Henry Louis Gates, Jr., '[Americans] saw a black image, that image would be negative.' Propelled by the racial sciences of Social Darwinism and eugenics, segregation was 'etched into the landscape of virtually every American town or city,' and embedded in President Wilson's 1913 resegregation of multiple federal government agencies and in state legislation segregating urban housing and facilities in factories. (Maltby 2023, 49)

Also, if, in fact, the film changed racial attitudes between 1915 and 1919, then why would this have resulted in a lengthy delay (as long as five years) before the increase Klan membership? If racial attitudes were significantly changed by screenings of *The Birth of a Nation*, then it cannot explain the rapid collapse of membership. Did racial attitudes suddenly change in 1925? Indeed, Ang (2023) argues that there was a persistent effect of screenings of *The Birth of a Nation* on racial attitudes. If so, then this would be consistent with a lasting effect on membership, although other forces may have hastened the decline after 1924. Moreover, other evidence of a persistent effect of screenings on racial attitudes in 1946 (Appendix Table A.X) and 1972 (Appendix Figure A.XXV) is not particularly robust (e.g., very large standard errors and many non-significant results) and based on the same faulty IV design described earlier.

Ang (2023) also cites as evidence of changes in racial attitudes a study by Ruth Peterson and L. L. Thurstone (1932) who conducted an experiment in 1931 in Crystal Lake, Illinois, in which 434 children in grades six to twelve were given an assessment of their attitudes toward "the Negro" a week before the children were shown *The Birth of a Nation* and then again, the day after the showing. Results showed a large, significant decrease (100 percent of a standard deviation) in having a favorable attitude toward "the Negro." It is unclear that the three-hour film's day-after effect on racial attitudes of adolescents in 1931 prove that the film significantly changed racial attitudes of adult males in 1915 to 1919 and caused significant behavioral changes years later. However, Douglas Cameron Moore (1971), in a Ph.D. dissertation not cited by Ang, conducted a similar study with

an arguably better research design in Crystal Lake, among 150 students in grades seven through twelve. The students were divided into treatment (100) and control (50) groups. Each group was given the same assessment of attitudes toward “the Negro” as used in Peterson and Thurstone (1933) and a newer assessment developed by Moore. The treatment group was shown *The Birth of a Nation* and the control group was shown an alternative film *Greed*. Results indicated that the screening of *The Birth of a Nation* was not statistically related to a change in attitudes toward “the Negro.” An interesting finding was that, among the treatment group, the screening increased favorable attitudes toward “the Negro,” although the increase was not statistically significant.

Despite the lack of a plausible mechanism, credible empirical evidence and a coherent explanation, Ang (2023, 1453) concludes the section on mechanisms with the following statement: “Though it is difficult to disentangle the extent to which these changes mediate the effect on historical Klan support—as opposed to being a consequence of it—they nonetheless suggest that *The Birth of a Nation* ultimately served to further radicalize racists.” The statement goes beyond the data and makes an unsubstantiated claim.

Ang’s analysis of the relationship between screenings of *The Birth of a Nation* between 1915 and 1919 and the rise of the second Klan is misleading in its conclusion that the former was a cause of the latter. Unfortunately, the patina of ‘credible’ econometric methods, which I have shown to be invalid, persuaded reviewers and editors to publish it in the *American Economic Review*.

Did *The Birth of a Nation* increase lynchings and race riots?

A second purported contribution of Ang (2023) is the analysis of the relationship between screenings of *The Birth of a Nation* in a county between 1915 and 1919 and subsequent lynchings and race riots in that county. For this analysis, a difference-in-difference approach is used that compared the probability of a lynching or race riot before and after a screening of *The Birth of a Nation* in counties that did and did not have a screening. Ang used an event-study specification of the difference-in-differences approach in which the effect of a screening of *The Birth of a Nation* is allowed to differ by time (months) before and after the screening.

To begin, it is important to note that almost none of the statistical evidence presented by Ang of the effects of a screening of the film on lynchings and race riots meets standard thresholds of statistical significance. Consider results presented in Ang’s Figure 3 (2023, 1438). This figure shows difference-in-differences

(event-study) estimates of the effect of a screening of *The Birth of a Nation* on lynchings and race riots. Of the 24 estimates shown, only four are statistically significant. Moreover, two of the four significant estimates are in the pre-period and indicate that lynchings and race riots were higher prior to screening of the film in counties with a screening relative to counties without a screening—in short, there is evidence of a poor research design. The other two statistically significant estimates are for the period six or more months after the screening of the film. Notably, all the statistically significant estimates are found in what Douglas Miller (2023), in his recent review of event-study designs, refers to as “end caps,” which are subject to bias caused by differential pre-trends and dynamic treatment effects.

A second significant problem with the analysis and estimates presented by Ang in his Figure 3 is that there is inadequate statistical power. The confidence intervals for estimates that Ang focuses on as key evidence of an effect of screenings are so large that the analysis is unable to reject an effect size for lynchings that is approximately between *8 and 13 times* the mean of the comparison group.⁶ The lack of statistical power is even more severe for race riots. The lack of statistical power is so severe that it renders the analysis virtually useless. It should not have been undertaken given the lack of statistical power and it should not have been used as evidence of the effects of screenings of *The Birth of a Nation* on lynchings and race riots, especially because none of the estimates, as huge as they are, are statistically significant. Here too, Ang (2023, 1439) makes an incredible statement about the evidence: “Together, the findings demonstrate the violent racism that *The Birth of a Nation* incited in local communities.” This statement is, in fact, unsupported by the evidence, again raising questions about the effectiveness of the peer review process of the *American Economic Review*.

As for lynchings, estimates in Ang’s Figure 3 indicate that screenings of *The Birth of a Nation* resulted in a large, even legitimately characterized as gigantic, increase in lynchings in the three months after screening. However, by months four and five, the effect of screenings was virtually zero. Then the effect of screenings becomes positive (i.e., fewer lynchings) six months or more after screening. A similar pattern characterizes results for race riots, although in this case the effect goes to zero three months after a screening only to reappear after six or more

6. For lynchings, Ang (2023, 1438) highlights estimates in months 0, 1, 2 and 3 after a screening. While it is difficult to see precisely, standard errors of estimates for these periods are between 0.0006 and 0.001. Given these figures, the minimum detectable effect size is between 0.0012 and 0.002. How big are these minimum detectable size estimates relative to the mean of comparison group? Ang (ibid.) reported that the mean probability of lynching for the sample is 0.0003, but it must be significantly lower for the comparison group given the size of the estimated treatment effects (e.g., 0.001) and the size of the treatment group (approximately 20 percent of all counties). A reasonable estimate is that the mean probability of lynching in comparison counties in the pre-period is 0.00015. Therefore, the minimum detectable effect size is between 8 to 13 times the mean of the comparison group.

months. The sudden month-to-month change from a huge effect to virtually no effect is unintuitive and inconsistent with any hypothesis (theory) of the effect of the film and other claims in the article (e.g., persistent change in racial attitudes). However, such a pattern is not surprising when there is little statistical power and extremely poor quality of the data on lynchings and race riots, which is an issue I turn to next.

Data on lynchings used by Ang come from several sources. However, it is widely recognized by scholars that the data, despite best efforts collecting it, is error-ridden. The most salient summary of the problem is by Charles Seguin and David Rigby (2019), which is a source relied on by Ang: “Ultimately, we will never know the full and exact extent of lynching in the United States, as many lynchings are undoubtedly lost entirely to the historical record. As such, our data set remains a work in progress” (Seguin and Rigby 2019, 8). The poor quality of the data on lynchings goes unmentioned by Ang. One potentially important problem with the lynching data is that most of it is based on newspaper reports. However, as Nancy MacLean (1994, 18–19) notes, newspapers were not particularly inclined to report lynchings: “Indeed, newspaper editors in the South, like politicians, tended to quaver in the face of Klan’s power. Clearly, they did not view the order as an innocent analogue of other fraternal lodges. While local papers boosted these, most maintained an eerie silence regarding the Klan’s activities. Few offered outright support, yet neither would they investigate or expose it.” One might speculate on how a local screening of the film might affect the propensity *to report on* a local lynching.

As noted previously, the analysis of lynchings lacks statistical power, and measurement error will be exacerbated by this problem (Gelman and Carlin 2014; Loken and Gelman 2017). Consider the likely seriousness of the problem. As Ang notes, in the six months prior to a screening of *The Birth of a Nation*, there were only two lynchings in all 600 counties that had a screening. Given that Ang used weekly data in his analysis, the number of lynchings indicate that in only two of the 18,000 county-week observations was there a lynching. Ang doesn’t report how many lynchings in this period occurred in comparison counties, but given that there were only 50 or so lynchings a year across 3,000 counties during the period of analysis, and that there were two in the 600 treatment counties, one can guess that it may have been around 23—i.e., in only 23 out of 72,000 county-week observations was there a lynching among comparison counties.⁷ As these small numbers suggest,

7. If there were 50 lynchings per year across all counties and two lynchings in 600 treated counties in six-month period, then it suggests that comparison counties had 46 lynchings in a year and 23 lynchings in six months. Of course, these are crude calculations, but they illustrate the small numbers of lynchings that underlie the analysis.

even a small number of lynchings missed, or lynchings included that were not actually lynchings, would have a significant impact on estimates. Clearly, lynchings are poorly measured and a rare (and horrible) event during this period. Given this, it was infeasible to conduct a credible statistical analysis. This, problem, however, did not deter Ang and did not seem to matter to reviewers.

The data on race riots used in the analysis of the effect of screenings of *The Birth of a Nation* between 1915 and 1919 are also plagued by measurement problems, and like lynchings, the measurement error problem is exacerbated by the lack of statistical power. One of the two data sources used by Ang is Paul Gilje (1996). Gilje's definition of a riot is "a riot is any group of twelve or more people attempting to assert their will through the use of force outside the normal bounds of law" (Gilje 1996, 4). Gilje justifies the use of the number twelve because it was used in the English Riot Act of 1715. Gilje is very clear that his count of riots is just one of many possible counts. In his Appendix titled "Counting Riots," Gilje provides his assessment: "How many riots were there in American history? For this study I examined over four thousand riots. That number, however, does not come close to the total of all riots... In some areas the gaps in my counting are glaring. As noted in Chapter 4 there were 5,112 persons lynched between 1882 and 1937. Since I only included lynchings where I read the details...my count only includes a few hundred of these" (Gilje 1996, 183).

These passages from Gilje make clear that the count of race riots used by Ang (2023) is surely error-ridden. As with lynchings this measurement error problem is exacerbated by the rarity of race riots, as shown in Figure 1. Except for 1919, the number of race riots is less than 10 per year. And the causes of the race riots of the Red Summer of 1919 have been well documented by historians and have nothing to do with screenings of *The Birth of a Nation* between 1915 and 1919 (Tuttle 1970; Gilje 1996; Voogd 2008; Whitaker 2009; McWhirter 2011). Returning Black soldiers who fought in WWI inspired an increase in unwillingness among Black people to accept the racist status quo. This combined with the mass migration of Black southerners to northern cities and the relatively scarce jobs and housing in those cities resulted in increased racial tension that exploded across the country in a series of race riots. Here again, Ang (2023) ignores the historical scholarship and uses low-quality data and ill-suited methods to come to a misleading conclusion.

Conclusion

The rise and fall of the second Ku Klux Klan has been extensively studied by historians. The causes of the Klan revival and its quick demise, all happening in the 1920s, have been convincingly documented (Mecklin 1924; Jackson 1992;

MacLean 1994; Stokes 2007; Rice 2008; Weinberger 2011; Gordon 2017; Hernandez 2019). Similarly, the reception of *The Birth of a Nation* by audiences and its role in film history has been extensively studied (Staiger 1972; Stokes 2007; Stern 2014; Stokes and McEwan 2023). It is widely accepted that *The Birth of a Nation* was a wildly popular and racist film that was more propaganda than history (Franklin 1979). It is clear that *The Birth of a Nation* glorified the original Ku Klux Klan. But it remains unclear how large a causal role it can be ascribed for the rise of the second Klan. The plan to revive the Klan by William Simmons predated the 1915 screening of *The Birth of a Nation* in Atlanta, and screenings during the first run of the film between 1915 and 1919 had little effect on Klan membership. It was not until the 1920s that Klan membership exploded, and the growth of the Klan is largely due to the organizing activities of the Klan, most notably the incentivized Kleagles who were paid per recruit and numbered in the hundreds.

Ang (2023) manufactures a hypothesis that screenings of *The Birth of a Nation* between 1915 and 1919 caused the rise and fall of the second Klan in the 1920s. The motivation for this hypothesis is not a careful reading of the historical scholarship, an analysis of existing scholarship, or a contextually grounded review of what occurred, but the simple fact that screenings of the film were rolled out in a staggered manner across the country and therefore could be viewed as a natural experiment that could be exploited to obtain quasi-experimental estimates of the effect of these screenings on Klan membership, lynchings, race riots, and 21st-century hate sentiment.

In fact, given that there were no Klan chapters prior to 1915, the natural experiment of the film's rollout could not be exploited for the purpose of studying the cause of the Ku Klux Klan revival. Instead, Ang (2023) implements an instrumental-variables procedure that is implausible on its face—the presence of a theater in 1914 in a county was not a random event—and that is severely flawed, as I have showed. The results of this flawed analysis do not contribute to the wider historiography. Because the same approach was used to study the effect of screenings of *The Birth of a Nation* between 1915 and 1919 on 21st-century hate sentiment, those results are equally dubious.

Ang's (2023) empirical analysis of the effect of screenings of *The Birth of a Nation* between 1915 and 1919 on lynchings and race riots lack statistical power and are based on mismeasured data that render these results useless. Even if we ignore these problems and take the evidence as presented, it does not meet commonly used standards of statistical significance that would merit paying attention to it, nor does it even reveal a pattern that can be linked to any cogent explanation of the evidence. In short, it is unreliable and uninformative.

To sum up, the Ang (2023) article was arguably unnecessary and poorly conceived, and the evidence in it is unreliable.

Data and code

Data and code used in this research are available from the journal's website ([link](#)).

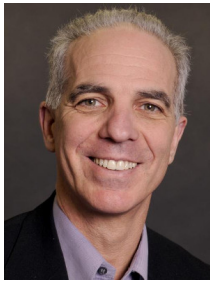
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