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What is This?

Right-wing skinheads – Nostalgia and binary oppositions

KATRINE FANGEN

The right-wing of the skinhead subculture has been well-known in Europe and the US since the late 1980s. The skinheads' militant appearance, endorsement of violence and Nazi gestures make them representatives of the worst qualities imaginable to people outside their group. In the aftermath of the atrocities of the Second World War, it is difficult to understand why youn g people join such a movement.

The skinhead subculture of the far-right, however, is partly constituted of elements that emphasise the contrasts to Second World War Nazism. This, then, is a subculture with a symbolic meaning which places an emphasis on differences from the organised Nazism of Hitler's regime. The right-wing skinhead does not simply promote an ideal of the Nazi life-world. Rather, it makes sense to understand this right-wing skinhead subculture as a bricolage consisting of elements with contrasting connotations. Fascist symbols and gestures are combined with rebellion as signified in the skinhead uniform. The subculture is similar to Nazism in that aggression is directed towards specific ethnic and political groups, but it differs from Nazism in its oppositional attitude towards authority and in the way its members regard the role of a leader.

As did the Nazis in the Second World War, right-wing skinheads stress binary oppositions in their definitions of themselves and others. They divide the world rigidly according to 'us and them', friend and enemy. Bauman (1991) provides a relevant terminology for the discussion of such identity formations. According to him, modernity differs from pre-modern societies in that the category of strangers is undetermined, and it is thus more difficult to label friend or enemy. This presents a problem as to how resolve the indeterminate, ambivalent position of strangers within an ideal of equality as represented in modernity.

The demarcations of difference here are the distinct youth subcultural elements and the skinhead's rebellion against authorities. The skinhead style originally grew out of the need to recover a positive symbolic value as a member of the working-class. Clarke (1976) classifies this as a distinctive 'down-ward option' and a recovery of the 'magical working-class community'. According to Clarke, the difficult situation of the working-class in England at the end of the 1960s strengthened the longing for

community, and sharpened the 'we-them' consciousness of working-class youths. These youths felt both attacked and excluded. The skinheads to whom Clarke refers clearly expressed this feeling. Their view was that everywhere someone is trying to boss them, someone who believes he is better than they are.

Clarke's skinheads worshipped traditional forms of group solidarity. They emphasised their inclusion in the proletariat by making fetishes of their heavy boots, jeans and checked shirts. Their focus was on territoriality and presenting a tough appearance. The skinheads' idea of the working-class community was mythical, as they imitated parts of the working-class community as seen on the football terraces and in the pubs. In choosing this lifestyle, skinheads made a 'down-ward option', Clarke argues. They symbolically communicated this option through what Hebdige (1979) calls the 'working-classness' of the style.

I will here discuss the social identity of the right-wing skinheads[1] by employing a combination of the analytical framework of the so-called Birmingham school in youth research (the Centre of Contemporary Cultural Studies, CCCS) and Bauman's theory of modernity.

In my comparisons with the Nazis of Hitler's regime, I will primarily use Ofstad (1989) as a frame of reference. Ofstad has analysed the different components of Nazism as expressed in Hitler's *Mein Kampf*. As Ofstad argues, Nazism is an ideology consisting of a range of different components, and must therefore be defined in more than one sentence. A person or group can represent Nazism in some of its components, but can at the same time differ from Nazism in relation to other equally central components. This perspective is useful when analysing contemporary groups of aggressive and militant right-wing skinheads. In some respects, it is correct to label them Nazis, in other respects the term is not applicable.

This essay draws some tentative conclusions regarding the contrast between present-day right-wing skinhead subculture and Nazism, analysing the skinhead subculture as a nostalgic identity solution wherein the skinheads reactivate what they believe to be the past working-class and Viking codes of honour.

Recovery of the magical working-class community

In most subcultures the definition of insiders and outsiders is crucial. There is often a definition of what the 'real' participant should be like, in contrast to various forms of 'hobby' or 'semi' members. This is also the case with the right-wing segment of the skinhead subculture. In order to be considered a 'real' skinhead in the right-wing underground, one must not only wear the proper clothes, one must also have the correct sense of the history of the skinhead subculture. In the words of Hebdige, their style communicates the desired qualities: 'Hardness, masculinity and working-classness' (1979). In this way the 'the symbolic objects - dress, appearance, language,

ritual occasions, styles of interaction, music - were made to form a unity with the group's relations, situation, experience'. There is a complex balance between the right-wing skinheads' identity as plain boys from the working-class who enjoy drinking beer together, and the fantasy world of men of honour at war with real and imagined enemies. This fantasy world with its warrior-like images and proletarian style, seems for some members to be more important than the political standpoints or the ideology.

However, the ideology is homologous with their notion of a potent manly image, as are the other parts of the nationalist skinhead package, which they project by focusing upon a uniformed way of dressing, a distinct type of rock music (oi), certain common activities (drinking beer and fighting anarchists) and a typical mode of communication (rough joking). All these aspects are part of the homology of their style. These young men do not achieve status by following conventional career routes in the labour market or through the education system. Rather, they express their status through body capital or through manifesting abilities in style, ideology or in the planning/execution of militant strategies.

When Norwegian right-wing skinheads gather in public, they use *finlandshetter*, black stocking-hats covering all of their face except for eyes and mouth. Although there are minor differences, the appearance of the group members seems highly uniform to outsiders. By looking alike, they feel they are a group, and can act accordingly. The same group dynamics are involved when the NS soldier dressed in military uniform looks and acts like one of the many, instead of being an individual perpetrator and fully responsible for his own actions. The difference is that the right-wing skinhead has the view that he is fighting the system, not acting on behalf of it. In practice, he is an anarchist, acting like part of a militia, intervening in situations he thinks was the responsibility of the police, but since the police does not do its job, he has to do it for them.

The subculture of right-wing skinheads in Norway originated in a situation different from the original English skinhead subculture of the 1960s. Nevertheless, these Norwegian skinheads are aware of the history of the style, and they emphasise the proletarian significance of being a skinhead. Their presence in this subculture actively diminishes their possibilities of a traditional career in the educational system and the labour market. In this sense, they have chosen a clearly 'down-ward option' (cf. Clarke, 1976). The 40 persons who were active in this subculture when I did my fieldwork were pupils, apprentices, welfare clients, manual labourers and one person who worked as a journalist in his own nationalist monthly. Bjørgo's (1997:85) data based on the information given by 73 right-wing activists arrested by the police in 1995, confirms the patterns found.

The construction of idealised images of past communities is a strong component of the social identity of these skinheads. They value the times when people lived in small, tightly-knitted communities where tradition made clear distinctions between right and wrong. In other words, they idealise the anti-pole of our current pluralist,

'post-modern' society. But the community of the skinheads is not merely an imagined community without any real basis. It is an actual community based on face-to-face contact, tied together by the social identity of the 'white power movement'. Concerts offer the most important occasions to manifest their sense of community. These concerts are often situated in areas far away from settlements. For the most part policemen are gathered outside the fence of the area. Within the area the skinheads are dressed in the prescribed uniform, some young men wear Nazi costumes. They all look more or less alike. When the band plays, they either stand without a movement, watching, or they stretch out their right arm, and shout *sieg heil*. Some of them explained to me that I must not think they are Nazis because they make Fascist salutes. They claim that the salute is meant only to underline their sense of community, and to show their contempt of contemporary society. If others perceive their use of symbols as shocking and provoking, they have achieved precisely what they want to achieve.

'Norway was at its best during the Viking era', one of the skinheads explained to me. 'At that time Norway was an empire and a leading nation of seafaring people'. The skinheads look at the Vikings as proud warriors who defended their land and their people. They pay less attention to the fact that the Vikings also met other cultures with curiosity and that they brought back home new and previously unknown goods.

Skinheads do not want to break with tradition. They laugh as if revealed when I point out the incongruency of their claiming to be nationalists, but at the same time adhering to an English lifestyle. But even so, they regard themselves as promoters of both Norwegian working-class culture and the values of the Viking era. They idealise collective deeds rather than individual ones. Conservative, they worry about breaks with tradition instead of celebrating the loosening from all kinds of ties.

In his description of 'late modernity' Ziehe (1989, 1991) emphasises the break with tradition and with the commitment of family. In this respect, the right-wing skinheads' attitudes resemble what Ziehe calls neo-conservatism. They do not celebrate ambivalence and the multitude of identities. They are oriented towards the realisation of the collective rather than the realisation of the self. The right-wing skinheads' contempt for other ethnic groups goes hand in hand with their nostalgic longing for exactly those qualities some of these groups represent; strong ethnic identity and family commitment. Strong family ties, and the feeling of honour related to one's own ethnic heritage are exactly those ideals right-wing skinheads claim are lacking in contemporary society. In this regard, one could see the way they relate to immigrants as a kind of love-hate relationship. When skinheads talk about putting their ethnic instincts into practice, it seems as if immigrants serve as their model (Fangen 1997).

The definition of self and the
definition of the other

Egil: Some of us are patriots, some are National Socialists. All of us are white comrades. Those who
do not have enough courage must leave us. Our milieu is hard. Everyone is morally against us. The
Blitz youths receive both economic and moral support. The immigrants and all the political parties
are against us. We are a persecuted minority. We have all the people against us, so we ought to be
sceptical. I trust my family, nobody else. I have a standpoint, and that provides me with a lot of
enemies. Many participants in this milieu are paranoid; we are persecuted by everyone. It's not an
ideal situation. What we want is to solve the problems of the streets. It's a race war out there. The
best thing would be a non-violent, democratic change, but this will not happen. 'They' make
themselves so strongly countable. The violence is a result of the decay of the system. Conflicts arise,
and lead to violence. I am against blind violence. Those who dominate the streets are stabbers, Blitz
youths, criminals, and immigrants. Immigrants have taken over more and more, and Norwegians
feel set aside. The immigrants are big spongers. They are bare-faced cheaters, stabbers. It's those
we are against. The cities are besieged by betrayers and traitors. It is the view of the system that
Nazis are traitors. To go from passivity to active resistance and to mark oneself as being against the
colourful community is sufficient in itself to get into trouble. But this is the struggle of nature. We
work through political campaigns in order to spread counter-information. The skinhead culture is
not connected to any political party. It's bullshit that skinheads search for a leader.

The skinheads' tendency to define their own lifestyle in opposition to that of other
subcultures in contemporary society is a shared characteristic among members of
most subcultures. This phenomenon of ingroup-outgroup boundaries - resentment
directed at certain 'others', that eventually leads to struggles between antagonistic
groups or gangs - extends the notion of a racist subculture. Less chauvinist-profiled
groups also take part in the same dynamics of gang feuding. However, as pointed out
by Bauman (1989: 65), what sets racism apart from the more common orientation of
xenophobia or contestant enmity is the fact that racism manifests the conviction that
a certain category of human beings cannot be incorporated into the rational order, and
that this category should be removed from the territory occupied by the group it
offends.

    This is the view shared by the right-wing skinheads. As regards the Second World
War, they plead that they are against gas chambers and extermination, but that
deportation would have been the right solution. The skinheads differ in their
definition of outgroups, and also in how drastically they claim one should react against
these outgroups. For some, the real enemy is an alleged conspiracy of Jews, for others,
immigrants in general and Muslims in particular are the groups who deviate most from
Norwegians, and are thus precisely the groups that should be excluded from
Norwegian society. The viewpoint quoted above – that immigrants represent cheaters
and spongers – is typical. They are looked upon as competitors for the scarce goods
of society, competitors who receive resources which belong to others.

    Using Bauman's (1991) terminology, one could say that those skinheads who want
to exclude Muslims are those who are most afraid of the people who are overtly
different, people who would metaphorically represent what Bauman calls the *enemy*.
By contrast, those adhering to the complex conspiracy theories constructing Jews as

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the dangerous 'Other', are afraid of the *stranger*. According to Bauman, anti–Semitism grows out of the fear of ambivalence, the uneasiness produced by the difficulty of determining to which category 'the Other belongs'. It is the 'enemy in [their] midst' (cf. Bauman, 1989:65) which produces their fear. This is seen when the anti-Semites among the skinheads say that the problem is that you never know whether or not a person is a Jew. In other words, you never know whether or not a person represents 'the conspiracy' (defined as ZOG, see Fangen 1997). By associating Judaism with various stigma, it is constructed as otherness, strangeness. As Bauman sees it, the very function of the Nation State is to deal with strangers, not enemies. Nationalism is then an ideology of friendship, proclaiming that natives are friends. The problem of foreigners in this ideology is that they are indeterminate, it is impossible to know whether they are friends or foes. In this sense, the foreigner who comes as a visitor and then leaves is easier to relate to than the foreigner who comes in order to stay. This is the reason why minorities such as Jews and Gypsies have posed such a problem to the nationalistic ideology of nation states. In his book about the Holocaust, Bauman (1989) discusses the stigma of strangeness as applied to Jews. It is the universality of Jewish homelessness which make Jews into a special case of the 'foreigner in our midst' for people believing in absolute categories.[2] This paranoid view projected on Jews also has its more realistic counterpart; the fear of traitors within their own ranks is a real threat which most of the right-wing skinheads have at one time or another experienced.

Rival groups confirm their division of the world into friends and enemies, but a traitor from their own ranks confuses the picture. This way of reasoning might be defined as typical of modernity, according to Bauman (1991). A traitor is a kind of stranger, he seems like 'one of us', but in practice he is not. He is the enemy from within, the one who confuses the categories, who takes an ambivalent, undetermined position.

Ambivalence means that a situation might be interpreted in many different ways, and in modernity we are continuously confronted with a wide range of alternatives, which make it difficult for us to choose. Ambivalence therefore, means, more than anything else, indeterminacy. Indeterminacy means that one finds oneself unable to define certain situations, and this leads to discomfort and existential anxiety. The right-wing skinhead's need to define the world according to a rigid friend-enemy polarisation reveals a need to reduce the complexity of contemporary society by idealising the homogeneity of the past.

An interesting process occurs when the National Socialist faction of the right-wing skinheads create themselves into enemies in the eyes of people outside their own group. By their use of Fascist salutes and symbols, they voluntarily participate in making the profile which causes their political opponents, the media and other institutions to stigmatise them. One could claim that right-wing skinheads have chosen their own stigma, that of being identified as a 'neo-Nazi' in the eyes of their

opponents: They have voluntarily and knowingly entered a group where Nazi symbols are used.

The most important outgroups for Norwegian right-wing skinheads are the various groups and organisations of anti-racists, as well as politicians with liberal policies regarding immigration. From time to time, skinheads direct violence at persons or buildings associated with these groups of people. A minor group within the anti-racist movement, the Anti-Fascist Action, also fight right-wing skinheads by means of violence. Immigrants are only a secondary target for right-wing skinheads; according to them it is immigration policy, not immigrants, they are fighting. Immigrants should not be beaten, because they only make use of the possibilities 'the system' gives them.

Both anti-racists and immigrants serve to define the negations of the right-wing skinhead: they are the anti-poles of what right-wing skinheads want to be. Another such pole is defined as middle-class people and authorities in general. For right-wing skinheads anti-racism and its ideal, multiculturalism, represent chaos. Here again, we see right-wing skinheads idealise order, which according to Bauman (1991) would represent the very quest of modernity. Anti-racist youths, and perhaps especially the so-called Blitz youths in the Norwegian setting, could with Bauman's terminology be seen as representing a post-modern identity solution, as they idealise anarchism (which could be seen, as the right-wing skinheads see it, as the very representation of chaos) and multiculturalism (which could be associated with pluralism, ambiguity, or alternatively the celebration of ambivalence). But looking more closely at the identity solution of the two groups, they do not consistently represent two obvious opposites. Both of them create images of the enemy, and through their war against each other, they plead for a strong categorisation of each other, and thus a strong 'us-them' division. Anti-racists are by their own self-definition identified as a negation, they are defined by the name of their enemies.

Identity is also defined by what one wants to be like. For right-wing skinheads, their view of working-class culture and the Viking era provide two distinct sources of identification. Common to both these views are that they are imagined as representations of homogeneity, community and honour. In other words, working-class culture and the culture of the Vikings here represent negations of today's society: multiculturalism, breaks with tradition and one-dimensional communities, and the lack of honour - an honour that once was considered an integral part of the uneducated working-class.

To rebel or to obey

The same binary way of defining the world was, of course, typical of the former Nazi life-world. The greatest difference between contemporary right-wing skinheads and the former Nazis has to do with another feature, namely the way the group itself is organised. The Nazi soldier was strictly placed within a hierarchy of leader and

follower, the leader's authority being absolute. In the life-world of right-wing skinheads this is far from the case. They honour certain past persons by giving them symbolic value. However, there are no claims for absolute obedience in their own groups, some of which have defined leaders but most which have not. This is in itself an important norm for right-wing skinheads. This is especially true for those who call themselves skinheads and who claim anti-authoritarianism as their norm, defined in conscious contrast to the common understanding of them as 'authoritarians', a term used by Adorno et al. (1950) in their post-war study of ethnocentrism.

This anti-authoritarian attitude is not a trait exclusive to Norwegian right-wing skinheads. The so-called 'leaderless resistance' is a main principle in the international white power subculture (Kaplan 1995).[3] There are similarities between the leaderless resistance trend and the tendency within the German youth movement at the beginning of this century, where anti-authoritarianism was the acknowledged ideal (Becker 1946). The so-called roamers (*Wandervogel)* expressed their anti-authoritarianism as a form of opposition to adult bourgeois life. Even so, they honoured the leadership principle, and the passionate subordination to a charismatic leader. The Nazis adopted several of the traditions of this youth movement, but perverted them at the same time. For example, the Nazis transformed the charismatic leadership principle into one of blind obedience (Becker 1946). The present right-wing underground more resembles the romantic yearning for charismatic non-authoritarian leadership, seen in the earlier voluntary youth movements, than the hierarchical principle of Nazism. However, there are also differences. The roamers discussed potential leader figures in their magazines (Becker 1946), but in the fanzines of the right-wing skinheads, there is no similar plead for a potential leader. However, in their discussions of various past heroes, they honour the same kind of leadership that was esteemed among German storm-troopers (Lindholm 1990) in that they emphasise these leaders' abilities to fight together with their soldiers on the front-line.

The kind of community right-wing skinheads create also has similarities with earlier quasi-military organisations like those mentioned above. The skinheads enthusiastically talk about gatherings in front of the campfire, first aid, camp-training in the woods, and war games such as paint-ball. They also talk of their 'brotherhood', a term which gives association to pre-Fascist male associations in Germany. Right-wing skinheads explicitly idealise volunteers fighting on an equal footing in the frontline on the basis of their strong patriotism more than the organised military service.

Male heroes

Paradoxically, right-wing skinheads revere various male heroes in their fanzines and at the same time they abandon the principles of leadership. However, this construction of heroes seems mostly to function in setting the norms for how ideal warriors should

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behave, and thus it creates the images which give their combat a sense of glory. They talk about violence, strength and heroes' sacrifices. Two men they use to construct such images are the former Nazi leader Rudolf Hess and former Skrewdriver vocalist Ian Stuart Donaldson. Both these men died mysteriously, and white power skinheads see their deaths as martyrdom in honour of 'the cause': 'A race-conscious man, who dares to stand up, but the accident hits and he dies'; Ian Stuart Donaldson, 'You gave us your life' (One for all – all for one)[4]. The ideal, as portrayed in this song, is to be 'race-conscious', courageous, and willing to die for the cause. This illustrates a point given by Lööw (1993 :70) that the 'cult of martyrs' '…strengthens members in their ideological beliefs, and confirms the idea of the ongoing racial war'. By identifying themselves with such male heroes, the skinheads feel a part of something much bigger than themselves, a war which, 'demands sacrifices, but also gives activists a chance of martyrdom' (Lööw 1993:76). In the international white power subculture, the cult of heroes and martyrs is of vital importance (Lööw 1993).[5]

Even though they do not arrange Nazi marches in the celebration of Rudolf Hess, as Danish neo-Nazis do, or are as one-sided Nazis as some of their Swedish counterparts, there are Norwegian skinheads who idealise Hitler:

> Egil: I am against leadership and authority in general. But I like a leader who does something more than those who are corrupt. That's what I like about Hitler. He was a man who was not a hypocrite. He meant what he said and he helped all Germans.

Hitler being a man who was not a hypocrite means, as I read it, that he was a man who dared to speak his hatred right out,[6] a man who was proud of his own aggression. A man who was so 'honest' and who has been so 'misunderstood' in his brave motives afterwards, demands celebration. It seems that some skinheads picture the 'real man' as an aggressor[7]. Some males burst into tears or get highly excited when they see a video with Hitler speaking, a condition almost identical to sexual arousal:

> Ragnar: When we watch Hitler on TV, some of the men nearly have an orgasm. In order to understand this, you can't view Hitler as a politician. It is more like viewing him as a Messiah. You need to understand the magic of it'.

Why does the celebration of such a leader lead to these sentiments? According to Reich (1972), the psychological function of the male leader is to provide his followers with some of his aura. This is the same function as a rock band has for its audience. By celebrating it, the audience becomes excited and feels part of the aura the band, or the leader, produces. In the white power subculture, the *Führer* is replaced by the band and the vocalist, who are paid homage by a noisy audience stamping their feet in the aggressive way of dancing typical of skinheads (Fangen 1995: 27, 34-35; Lööw 1997). They are not a highly disciplined group, but they become enthralled by an atmosphere based on hatred of mainstream society. This atmosphere has several parallels to that created at Nazi mass gatherings.

The ideal type of charismatic leadership is, according to Weber's (1922) classic

description, leadership according to an affectionate devotion to a ruling person and his gifts of grace, especially his magical abilities, his heroic acts, the power of his spirit or his words. He is therefore obeyed only as long as he retains these qualities. When his grace leaves him, he loses his heroic force or the masses' belief in his leadership qualities, and his power will disappear. The rock star, personified in the figure of Ian Stuart Donaldson, clearly fits this picture. However, what is lacking among the skinheads is the will to obey. They honour Donaldson because he was one of them, he was a fellow comrade, not an absolute leader to whom they pay tribute.

It is, however, an open question what would happen if a really strong leader were to appear. So far, no one has united right-wing skinheads in any country. Yet, Ian Stuart Donaldson has been honoured within the white power subculture in many countries. In other words, it is the rebel, who attracts them as an ideal, but to obey his rules blindly is an inconceivable thought. Rather, it is Donaldson who is honoured because he managed to produce this specific blend of youth subculture, rock music and rebellion, within the idea of white supremacy.

Thus, the ideal is an image of aggressive youths not suppressed by authority, choosing to act as voluntary warriors in the fight for white supremacy. This view is linked to their belief in the superiority of the white race, which has been a part of imperialism throughout history. Among right-wing skinheads, however, this view is conceived as revolutionary. The fighting image redefines other possible interpretations of them when they are examined as individuals rather than as members of the group. But it is their belonging to the group that provides them with their sense of power and meaning. In this way authoritarian ideas of white supremacy provide them with a sense of power. They are powerful not because of their own personal qualities, but because they are part of a group, which reinforces the ideal of them as defined by their race, which per definition is powerful. This authoritarian view is combined with the idea of rebellion and a community of aggressive masculine young men. In some senses they idealise authoritarianism, in others, they oppose it since they regard themselves as rebels who do not follow anybody's rules, but only their own instincts. They are rebels who enjoy 'peak experiences', often in the form of violence and underground actions (Lindholm 1990).

According to Norwegian right-wing skinheads, it is important to respect and support those with the most experience, but not to obey them blindly. Young, inexperienced skinheads greatly admire the underground's 'eldest'. It is not uncommon for a young participant to proudly tell another group member that 'I have shaken X's hand', thus expressing that merely having done so makes him feel important.

Sometimes their own leading figures might be explicitly honoured in the fanzines. This occurred for example when one of the leading skinheads fired a shot against a crowd of anti-fascist youths who had thrown stones against the windows of the apartment where right-wing skinheads had gathered. The perpetrator managed to hide himself from the police for a couple of months after the episode. The fanzine *Patrioten* (The Patriot) (No. 5, 1996) addressed him as 'a hero of freedom' and

described his shooting as pure self-defence on the part of the group. His use of violence and his ability to escape and hide from the police gave him a persona to which the others deferred. They addressed him as 'hero', although such labels are seldom applied to their fellow-members, no matter how experienced they are.

One of the leading males argues that those who are fit to fight 'in the front-line' should be treated with greater respect, and receive more support than other skinheads. However, he stresses the need for guidance more than the need for obedience:

> Guttorm: There are many frustrated and immature people within this movement. I feel I have to be there as a mentor for the youngsters, I have to make them conscious. The rebellion has to have a direction, it can't spread in all directions, that's too chaotic. The whole movement is too unstable... The youths need to (...) become more idealistic. They must learn to take the step from rebel to politically aware idealist. It is important to be conscious of the dark sides of one's own nature. It is important to mature ideologically, and to get to know one's ethnic instincts, instead of taking up false surrogates like hip-hop culture.

This guidance should lead the rebellion in a certain direction, defined by the ideology of the experienced. A part of leading the rebellion in a proper direction is to stop unnecessary internal quarrels. A skinhead once put an end to a meaningless quarrel which had gone on for the whole evening among two younger skinheads. One of them had spent the evening criticising his friend because a former girl friend of his had later become involved with a black man. The offender called this girl a 'nigger-cunt', and accused his friend of not being a nationalist because he had been involved with such a woman. The accusations became more and more desperate as the night progressed and the offender became more drunk. Finally, the leading skinhead intervened, shaking his fist at them. This threatening gesture was enough to calm them down, and the conflict was brought to an end before it turned into a fight.

This incident illustrates how the mentor role functions in practice - not by gentle guidelines, but by force. There are also occasions when leading skinheads try to rule younger skinheads by threatening to spread rumours about them. Despite the brutality of this picture, there is agreement among skinheads that they do not condone absolute leadership.

In Nazism, the feeling of self is transformed into the sense of being one with the Nation, and the person discovers himself in his leader. Because of this, he regards himself as a defender of the people's property - the Nation. At the same time, the follower can feel disdain for the masses, and put himself above them, considering himself to be an individualist. His identification with his genius leader is so deep-rooted that he forgets his own insignificant role as follower (Ofstad, 1971:76). The bonds with the leader are similar to the bonds with a father figure. It is the belief that the father will 'fix it all' that makes the power of the dictator so great. The follower expresses a naive belief that the leader, like a comforting father, will be able 'to put it all in order'. The follower believes that the leader is infallible, and that the future is safe in his hands. On the one hand, then, the leader has much greater stature than his subordinates but, on the other, he needs to embody elements with which the

masses can identify. The more helpless a person, the more eager he will be to identify with the leader. Nazism was authoritarian in the sense that its leaders could claim absolute obedience. It was brutal in the sense that it required its followers to carry out acts that would often harm others. It was, in other words, an aggressive principle of authoritarianism. The follower was expected to show happiness by acting responsibly (*Verantwortungsfreude*), while the same time, all individual responsibility was excluded. The follower was expected to blindly trust his superior's orders in the same way that Abraham was expected to blindly obey God (Ofstad, 1971:52-53).

Nazi soldiers were expected to show blind obedience. Among the right-wing skinheads, there are no such demands. The guiding norm is loyalty, an ideal they associate far more with the Vikings than with Nazism. They are expected to show loyalty not only to the group, but also to their people, race, or Nation. The threat against loyalty to the group is treachery. On some occasions, central activists have served as informants for the police, or they have told journalists things that should have been kept secret. On other occasions, people who appeared to be friends and like-minded, turned out to be infiltrators. Informers and infiltrators are therefore a constant threat to the subculture, and in this way exaggerates the intense desire to distinguish between friend and foe.

Despite their urgent need to stand together and join forces, right-wing skinheads often express dissatisfaction with the lack of comradeship in the group. The reasons for this lack of solidarity are various; the subculture consists of fairly different personalities and ideological orientations, its members are constantly exposed to attacks, and they are often under supervision. Therefore they become frustrated and suspicious, and transfer some of this frustration and suspicion to one another.

Distance versus closeness to victims

The erosion of responsibility in Nazism was in part induced by a mechanism which Ofstad calls 'distance to the concrete' (1971:56). The principle that the person with most power should make decisions was synonymous with the person who had least contact with those who bore the consequences of the decisions. Furthermore, those who executed the decisions had no power of their own. In this way, Hitler could decide to kill without even using the word 'kill'; the context in which he said it, made it obvious what he meant. He could merely tell Himmler to 'get rid of them, I don't care how'. Himmler had to make some decisions about how to accomplish this, but did not have to plan it in detail. The person under him in the hierarchy had to work out the details, and those working in the concentration camps led the victims into the gas chambers. Ofstad (1971:57) stresses the fact that the principle has been the same in other wars. Thus, the President of the United States was able to maintain a feeling of moral righteousness, even though he had been the one who ordered the dropping

of napalm bombs over the people of Vietnam. There were, however, also Nazi soldiers with no distance to the victims. The storm-troops of the SS exercised direct and brutal power on people.

The violence produced by the skinheads is concrete and experienced as highly real. Paul Willis (1988/1977) has described the joy working-class lads find in fighting. Street violence makes reality pause for a minute. According to Willis, the violence expresses important values of working-class culture, such as masculine hubris, dramatic display and group solidarity. He (1977:34-35) observes that it is disastrous for the lads' informal standing and their masculine reputation if they refuse to fight. When they are insulted or intimated, they are expected to fight. Willis also finds that it was often the ability to fight that gave status based on other grounds: masculine presence, being from a famous family, being funny, etc.

The same values are highly prevalent among right-wing skinheads. They do not value the distant and bureaucratic violence of imperialistic wars but set store by the intimate violence in the streets. They hold that violence is legitimate when carried out between two equally big gangs, or when motivated by the need for revenge, and they often refer to the Vikings when describing their own values concerning violence.

The Nazis pictured the world as being a state of war between 'the strong' and 'the weak': the strong would survive, the weak would not. The strong were those who were physically stronger than the others, and who were able to turn the weak into slaves (Ofstad, 1971). Those who lost would always be the weak no matter who they were. The Aryans were strongest, even if 'Aryans' included people who were not German, and even if they were beaten by others. Another definition of 'the strongest' was the people who were the biologically best-equipped; in other words, people with diseases or handicaps were reckoned as 'weak'.

The Nazis secured their own sense of being strong by forcing others to obey. This gave them opportunity to feel contempt because the others permitted themselves to be forced upon. The ability to use power was an evidence of strength. Harald Ofstad (1971:46) has convincingly shown how identification with power was closely linked to contempt for weakness. Identification with power was linked to disgust for anyone who was physically weak, sick, or who surrendered in combat. The contempt of weakness was linked to anxiety concerning one's own weaknesses.

The right-wing skinheads' celebrate strength, but as rigidly opposed to weakness as it was for the former Nazis. The skinheads more often refer to the notion of honour than to the notion of strength, and they conceptualise this by idealising the Vikings. In their view the Vikings fought together for the honour of their people. According to the skinheads a man must face his fellows and be ready to stand up to his rivals[8]. One activist described the Vikings as men of blood and honour[9]. The norm the Vikings based their solidarity on was 'you shall always be a friend to your friend but no man shall ever be a friend to a foe's friend'. This sentence appeals to right-wing skinheads because it expresses their sense of joining forces against those who are against them. They must defend each other, but at the same time they must always

be aware of possible enemies wanting to split, supervise or attack them. Therefore, they never become friends with foes or their friends, and are always aware of the risk of infiltrators or traitors.

A factor which otherwise would inhibit their violence is their claim that 'law and order' is important in society. Despite similarities in the acceptance of violent strategies, this attitude conflicts with that of their opponents, the anti-fascists. The latter are anarchists in the sense that they actively oppose the police, whereas some right-wing skinheads talk about friendly discussions with policemen. I once heard one of them say to a policeman 'we are really on your side, you know'. They see themselves as defenders of order, and if things were the way they wanted them to be they would fight with the police against the anarchists.

But they do not approve of policemen who work in the Special Branch. They argue that the higher policemen are placed in the hierarchy, the more they are part of the 'conspiracy'. Thus, again an anti-authoritarian view, or as they say, 'power corrupts'. In their view the Special Branch is part of the corrupt conspiracy. As they are under the surveillance of the Special Branch, the skinheads' identity as a revolutionary force is confirmed. Thus, they are not delinquent outsiders, they are a revolutionary group working for the true interests of the nation. I once said to a skinhead after he had told me of a theft he had committed, 'you're a criminal, aren't you?' His response was 'No I'm not, I am a revolutionary. However, the conspiracy regards my standpoint as a criminal'. Thus, they look upon themselves as revolutionary rebels, who claim law and order in society. This double-sided image in many respects invalidates the picture of them as solely authoritarian.

A world apart

The fantasy world that right-wing skinheads create is one that is relatively closed to outsiders. In order to understand what attracts young men to this subculture, one has to understand their participation not only as a political protest or the result of inadequate personality development. Rather, one should take into consideration how the relations between them form a world of excitement and community, and how their commitment is strengthened by the constant negative confirmation of outsiders. The need to be noticed by others, of experiencing the extraordinary, and of belonging somewhere, are recurrent themes among these right-wing skinheads.

Even though their community has its internal threats, these men become addicted to a blend of adventure and excitement. This is the reason the community becomes so important to them, providing them with a sense of importance and commitment they would not experience with the same strength anywhere else.

In this respect the right-wing subculture provides them with a feeling of power. Through underground actions and street violence they are taken seriously as a threat by the outside world. They present themselves as a blend of plain men from the working-class and warriors in a 'race war' in which the protagonists are both 'the

system' and the anti-racists. In this way, they define themselves as existing in a world of strict us-them boundaries. They call for collective identities that no longer have the same 'natural' function as in the past. As pointed out by Bauman (1991:69), collective identities must now be artificially produced, and this is precisely what the right-wing skinheads are attempting. They claim that race, nation and subcultural belonging is what really matters, and they blur the constructed quality of these entities. In their ongoing war with the militant part of the anti-racist movement, their sense of collective identities takes real form, it becomes a feature with real consequences. This war therefore confirms their conspiratorial picture of the world.

They nostalgically long for the modern working class community, and reject the post-modern order of multiple identities. But their movement could be regarded as a post-modern nomadic movement defined by their anti-immigration position, rather than an ideology or image of society.

In real life, their identities could also be seen as post-modern. Many of them are unemployed, non-belonging (nomadic), ambiguous, coming from divorced families, but in their ideals they are modern and they celebrate clear-cut categories, traditions and tightly-knit families. As Bauman writes, the nightmare today is to be denied identity. And it is exactly this fear, the failure to find an identity, which leads young people into the right-wing subculture, and compels them to insist on rigid us-them categories.

Notes

1 The essay is based on material gathered through participant observation during 1993-1994, interviews from the period 1993-1997, and written material from right-wing skinheads. During my one year of participant observation among these skinheads, I achieved first hand knowledge of how they themselves reason: how they legitimate their ideology, their violent actions, and the reason why they entered this subculture in the first place. This method has given me unique access to the skinheads' interpretations of their own participation. A method like this makes it possible for me not only to discuss the events and attitudes of these people as seen from outside, and thereby to test various forms of explanations from the outside. I have also had the opportunity to generate theories of right-wing extremism by using the interpretations these people make of themselves, and to use various analytical tools in close conjunction with the data.
For a more detailed description of my fieldwork, see 'Blant høyreekstremister - utsnitt av et sosiologisk feltarbeid', *Sosiologiske fantasier*, Oslo: Ad Notam, 1998.
2 Bjørgo (1997) has discussed the difference between anti-Islam conspiracy theories and anti-Semite theories in more detail.
3 The concept of leaderless resistance originated with the American Ku Klux Klan figure Louis Beam and was popularised in William Pierce's novel *Hunter*. (Kaplan 1997) gives a detailed overview of the origin and development of the leaderless resistance concept.
4 A song by the Norwegian white power rock band *Norske Legion*; Norwegian Legion.
5 Their heroes are almost exclusively men, since the organisation is dominated by men. The cult of the heroes and martyrs perpetuates the mythology of a "brotherhood in arms", in which extreme manliness retains its centrality to group identification'. So far, we have not seen

marches in honour of certain heroes in Norway, nor is it common among Norwegian activists to celebrate the birthdays of Hitler, Robert Matthews or Norwegian war heroes. The few vague trials that have taken place in Norway have mostly ended up in tragicomic circumstances, like the time three people went to Quisling's grave in order to honour his birthday. One of them had announced the occasion to the Norwegian telegram bureau beforehand, but on the day, only two of them dared to go. They had forgotten to bring with them flowers or anything which would have turned the event into a ceremony. When participating in Nazi marches in Sweden or Denmark, Norwegian activists generally get drunk, and do not contribute to their Nordic fellow-activists' attempts to make these events into highly-disciplined gestures of power. As a consequence, the picture neighbour countries often have of the Norwegian activists is one of jolly comrades who are not serious. In recent years, some activists have actively opposed this picture, acting soberly and disciplined on such occasions.

6 In his analysis of Nazism, Ofstad (1989: 55-56) points out that the trend was rather that Hitler never was explicit. He never gave the order to 'kill all Jews', rather he spoke of the '*Endlösung*'. According to Ofstad, the responsibility for decision-making in the Nazi system was marked by 'distance to reality', which would be the opposite of actually 'saying it right out'.

7 Another example of this is the saying in *Bootboys* No. 1992 that the truth about the original English skinheads was that 'they hated everybody!'.

8 Their idealisation of maleness has also qualities similar to the male images typical of Nazism. Within Nazism, men should be strong, they should have courage, and they should be able to fight. Men should be unsentimental, demanding, and creative. A real man could not have any deep contact with women. Real men should only have contact with men, as in the SS and other male Nazi groupings. Real men were bound together by comradeship and by loyalty to their leader. In this sense, being Nazi, meant being strong and male. For a more detailed discussion of the construction of masculinity among right-wing skinheads, see (Fangen 1998b).

9*Blood and Honor* is also the name of a militant skinhead magazine, started by the former Skrewdriver vocalist Ian Stuart.

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