

Dream-Land

The Mythical Skinheads' Communitarianism ¹

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The origins

Skinheads are a kind of subculture² with well-defined aesthetical, iconographical and ideological connotations, which are deliberately shown and clearly flaunted. Those kind of people can be easily recognized on the basis of their behaviour, clothes, music styles and phrasing, expression. These aspects help Skinheads show their identities to the others and strengthen their own. It is quite hard to reconstruct in depth the history of this social movement from the start: Skinheads seem to have a magmatic, unclear nature which makes it extremely hard to analyze and difficult to identify its roots. The lack of official studies on this subject is great, even if, on the other hand, non-scientific sources, self-interpretations of Skinheads themselves and journalistic records are quite common. Despite this uncertainty, however, it is still possible to roughly piece together the key happenings which made this phenomenon rise.

The journey starts in England in the 60's, where music was the main expressive instrument used by youths in suburban neighbourhoods. In that period, in fact, music genres like *Soul*, *Jazz*, *Ska* were spreading amongst younger generations, with themes particularly addressed to youths and their role in the society and adopting unconventional aspects far different from the traditional ones. These music genres were forceful, understandable without any kind of specific knowledge, with their own behaviour rules and reference codes figured as new, alternative options. Therefore postwar generations identified their new needs and expectations with this kind of music themes. Actually it is not surprising that music and musical idols played a decisive and essential role in the birth of the Skinheads phenomenon.

Generally speaking, it is possible to affirm that at the base of the Skinhead movement there is a union between at least two different subcultures (mostly due to similar music tastes and preferences). The first subculture was the one brought by the young immigrants from Jamaica (and their sons), with their Jamaican music style. This group was, actually, not completely integrated and accepted by the official society, and was often accused of crime costumes which had to be avoided. They were also blamed for being responsible of microcriminality.

¹ Translated in English by dr. Martina Tomasello

² Our definition of subculture is made out from the essay *Subculture, Cultures and Class* (Clarke et alii, 1991: 9-74), which is the theoretical introduction and *Resistance Through Rituals* (Hall & Jefferson 1991), the collective volume which gets together several interesting researches about English juvenile post-war cultures. According to those authors, a subculture is the result of a differentiation, from a previous other culture, which happened after the differentiation of a social segment from the main one (carrier of the close-culture). A subculture always has an ambivalent relationship with the close-culture, where it wants to be different from, but at the same time, where it takes its main features from. In this place discussing the theoretical value of the definition taken from those English authors (inspired by gramscian thesis) doesn't matter. This model is useful for our purpose because it helps us understanding the opening, actually ambivalent, of Skinheads' culture and the close-culture of the working class living in English suburbs.

Consequently, they assumed rebel and unconventional attitudes, making use of marijuana and mixing their traditional Jamaican clothing style with role models of Hollywood movie gangsters' one. Outcast in their own country, those young boys were generally called Rude Boy, 'dirty' boys. They got possession of this pejorative expression, commonly used to address them by the society, and turned over its meaning into a positive attribute, proudly using it to symbolize their willingness to refuse the integration into the conformist and bourgeois British society that was isolating them.

The second subculture was called Mod (short form for *modernist*), which young proletarian English boys belonged to. This social class, at the time, was suffering massive transformations due to changed social conditions and growing consumerism-models which were spreading across all social levels. Proletarian young boys had anti-conformist role music models as well, or, at least, they defined them so (in addition to the previous ones to notice also *Reggae and Rock steady*).

A social distress and a strong detachment from middle class values were the common ground which linked those two subcultures, which were both looking for alternative solutions. This similarity made them develop a sort of collaboration and mutual understanding, and they started sharing places, concerts, behaviors. The musical, social and, afterwards, political hostility towards the dominant social codes was an additional common feature, which made their union stronger. They also started developing some kind of antagonism towards those young groups which seemed just to pretend, and not really feel, a contempt for the existing reality: Rockers and Hippies in particular were two sub-cultures that used to wear their hair long, and this is not just as a coincidence. The Rockers' powerful-motorcycle mania and their leather jackets, which became their uniforms, were forms of consumerism just superficially hidden under popular elements. The hostility towards Hippies was stronger from Rude Boys and Mods, and the opposition against this subculture was a crucial element for the Skinheads' origins. In the middle 60's the spread of the Hippy movement led to several transformations in young generations' culture, giving origin to another subculture with its own distinctions and differences from the Mod's. People began to look at Hippies as bored well-to-do people, who could afford expensive clothes, universities, colleges and any other kind of prestigious further education structures. They were targeted as the ones who used psychedelic drugs which were too expensive for the young groups living in the working-class neighbourhoods and, moreover, as the ones with psychedelic rock-music passion, who were just attracted by the latest trends. Their international, left-wing and Communist-sympathizing political activism was perceived as far more abstract and different from the needs of the real working-class men: a kind of game played by unsatisfied bourgeois. Hippies, with their fake sloppiness, were also accused to be part of an artificial trend, while their outward refuse of material assets was seen as a fake poverty, built by people who, in fact, were rich enough to live without working, thanks to their leisured classes of origin. Both Rockers and Hippies were blamed for their lack of roots, anarchism, disdain for their own homes, and were seen as selfish individuals who condemned things that some others could only dream in their lives of sacrifice and work in the suburbs, without any hope to go away. Rockers and Hippies were, in fact, offering new role models, alternative, different and they were the opposite of what Skinheads wanted. They were Skinheads' rivals, the reality they had to face and to distinguish from.

In the urban decay of the more deprived areas, the general opposition against Rockers and Hippies and the common experience of marginalization, combined with similar musical genres, made Mod and Rude Boys young cultures mix and join together, in the late of 60's. This amalgamation gave birth to a new synthesis, with its own original musical, ethical and aesthetical reference codes: the Skinheads'.

The official date, which is acknowledged by its own members, is 1969, still celebrated and recognized in the '*the Spirit of 1969*' motto. The typical musical model of Skinheads' rising, at least at the beginning, was *Punk-Rock*, especially in its *Oi* version.

The nostalgia of working-class life

One of the social basis of Skinhead's phenomenon is, for sure, the gradual decay of English suburban neighborhoods, and the slow, although unstoppable, embourgeoisement of the working class' lifestyle and expectations. Public assistance services provided while the economic boom of the 60's was rumbling on, didn't change at all lifestyles and needs of the lower classes, in their working class areas. The advantage to the poorest social classes given by public free or cheap services (medical, education or transport assistance) is unchallenged but, as much as the diffusion of new domestic technologies, it didn't have a real impact on the reality and possibilities of those social classes. In the meanwhile, indeed, the well-being and better-lifestyle boom was strong among richer social sectors, and the spread of bourgeois models was wide thanks to new mass-communication channels: changes like those made the concept of poverty more relative, deepening the gap between rich and bourgeois families, but keeping the middle-class conditions under in a protected world of fake flattery and appearance. The bourgeois wellbeing, apparently easy to afford, took the shape of consumerism for the working class: offering goods and products as synonym of progress, left, in fact, unchanged, the gap between those who could take advantage from the system and those who remained on the edges of society.

This situation had, as a consequence, the crumbling, more and more evident, of collective sympathy and, at the same time, the sense of class-antagonism which linked working class members to their families. The communitarian solidarity, which was a strong issue for the workers, disappeared, beaten by the bourgeois individualism which, together with a strong consumerism, captured consciences and lifestyles of everyone.

Political disappointments cancelled civic responsibility, and a rising number of people abandoned, in fact, the fight for social justice and equity, without even really being aware of it, trying to penetrate into that craved bourgeois world. How deep, effectively, was the growing embourgeoisement of the working class is not relevant for the purpose of our research. However, the prospective of those young generations is a decisive point. The conflict between different groups, linked together with an existential precariousness, the lack of stable employment, the absence of future expectations and a feeling of constriction generated by a wild consumerism, led a slice of young public (the ones who became Skinheads) to refuse what was, in their opinion, a de-personalization brought by that consumerist society. The standardization of production, the lack of personality, the homologation which erased differences between identities, were considered all threats to traditional values which needed to be recalled again: solidarity, braveness, sacrifice. Skinheads, in fact, tried to find specific codes in order to reaffirm their distinction and their refusal towards homologation, at a time when 'value' was synonymous with 'item', a sort of 'reification of values'.

In order to express their convictions and their opposition, Skinheads adopted traditional codes generally used by the English working class: codes that, according to their say, the working class was effectively abandoning. Reinterpreting traditions which were going to be cancelled from their current culture, while the integration process of the working class was growing and almost successful, was the way they used to build their new identity.

Amongst those traditional values, great importance must be given to their patriotism, in fact quite close to a fervent nationalism. Talking about politics, the English working class, including in the definition also the ones living in great urban neighborhoods, never had antinational or internationalist attitudes. On the contrary, it has always demonstrated to be truly patriotic. Skinheads' patriotism will definitely be at odds with Hippies. Since 1969, which is, as previously said, the official date of the origin of this phenomenon, Skinheads bands had several conflicts with Hippy groups who were protesting against the Vietnam war. Social origins, more than political views, were responsible for the hostility between those two young factions. Skinheads classified Hippies as rich sons of a parasitical and hypocrite bourgeoisie. Hippies were actually privileged by their own social conditions and origins, and could attend higher levels of education thanks to their economic status (universities,

prestigious schools). For this reason, their education levels were higher and more qualified, completely incomparable with the working-class level. Hippies' contestation was, in Skinheads' opinion, just a game, played by the ones who could afford living without working and had enough money to waste time with the political trend of the moment. Hippies were, in fact, a perfectly integrated part of the system, who fought the same society which guaranteed them, and only them, a considerable amount of privileges. Time passing by, the opposition between those two groups assumed also political connotations, and drove Skinheads to a right-wing orientation: for a couple of years more, however, they will just be characterized especially by two different musical and clothing styles.

In defense of manhood

Skinhead's style quickly spread from England to both Anglo-Saxon countries and continental Europe, maintaining its peculiar features and the values which characterized their movement in England. The relationship with the working class and deprived neighborhoods which, still nowadays, is typical of Anglo-Saxon Skinheads is probably less strong than in the other countries, but lifestyles and essential values remained everywhere the same. The factors which will remain constant are those listed here: a denial of de-virility and enhancement of physical strength, a strong attachment to their own territory, which led them to a violent defense against 'the others', a parochialism, a patriotic and nationalistic political orientation, an anti-intellectualism, the identification of the whole group with the same musical genre, a peculiar clothing, body and tattoo style.

As previously said, the proud demand of their own class identity is the basis of Skinheads' subculture, as much as their collective solidarity, patriotism, support of the traditional values, as fight, work, sacrifice. Skinheads, somehow, would have liked to reverse the embourgeoisment of the working class, and maintain, through their subculture, their typical ethical and social values alive.

Skinheads, in a moment when the decay of their own values was unstoppable in the society, put themselves forward as the only community able to pursue the classical values of the working class. For this reason on one hand they fight against their oppression and the decay caused by an hypocrite and oppressive society while on the other they try to embody an alternative life-model based on their fundamental values, even if, as we will see, deeply molded.

As an alternative community, as much as deprived neighborhoods' heirs, Skinheads considered their popular identity under attack. Considering themselves defenders of their community, they identified official culture and institutional authorities' economic influence as threats against their own identity. Their refusal of institutional authorities will be, actually, a steady theme of their controversy. They considered police, bureaucracy, clergy, teachers and all those who set rules as illegitimate bodies. All the administrative structures managing a society which was, in their opinion, fair just on the surface, were in reality power hypocrisy, which forced individual freedoms into a huge amount of absurd rules.

Teachers and clergy men have always pretended to be in favour of the working class but, actually, they have always been ready to use the law against them. For this reason their paternalism is seen as the other side of a powerful and clever social structure, which, however, breaks cover when bourgeois look at Skinheads with disgust and with their superior manner. Skinheads' expressive codes are a reaction to the threat they feel coming from the outside. Those codes generally, but not only, come from some working class-original and young models, where Skinheads, as said, come from. Musical culture has, obviously, a strong influence in Skinheads' identity. Different kinds of *punk-rock*, especially in the *Oi* version, are simple musical styles, easy-listening, unpretentious, which are completely different and far from the so-called 'heavy going music'.

Given the fact that Skinhead's biggest threat is mostly seen as their own 'de-virility', their expressive codes are mainly based on the highlight of their manhood. The first evident sign can be noticed in their clothing style and hairstyle: they wear, as their own name suggest, short or shaved hair. Their haircuts certainly take origin from the hygienic habits adopted in factories or during military service. This habit, however, is connected to the habit of wearing long hair typical of Hippie and all the other trends-follows, which were considered effeminate. The same concept applies to their long and tidy sideboards, extremely common amongst Skinheads, which recall the sturdy and free image of sailors (where sideboards are born), and are an evident way of showing their manhood through their undercoat.

Their simple, basic clothing deliberately refer to working clothes, and move away from fashion trends and brand-display (at least the famous fashionable ones), relating to the simplicity typical of the working class. At the same time, with several patriotic and army badges (boots, coats, nationalistic T-shirts) they intended to show off their manhood.

The exaltation of strength, on the edge of violence, has its origin in the ancient protests against the police during strikes, industrial actions and demonstrations, but its meaning changed into something which wants to enhance manly and masculine features, as, for instance, violent fights and physical presence.

The habit of creating brotherhoods, groups with closed-access with a strong sense of solidarity and elite fellowship, comes from a working-class tradition as well, where being cohesive was necessary against police and during strike actions. Those brotherhoods have been enriched with new values (even if maintained, in part, traditional elements) which refer to manhood, and are characterized by a stage-process, a sort of initiation (getting drunk for the first time, first sexual intercourse, first fight...). Youths and adults maintained the habit to meet all together in pubs until the middle '900, in order to socialize and spend time doing things together. The exaltation of hand labor and the contempt for 'bourgeois jobs' mingled with chauvinist attitudes: respect for hard work and toil, contempt of danger, braveness proofs. It was a form of sexism definitely not free from virile attitudes.

All the elements listed have been shaped and molded in the Skinheads' subculture, which made them different and added its own meanings. Those masculine features, with their own working-class traditions deep-rooted in poor neighborhoods and working fight, wanted to confirm a protest against homologation, de-sexualization, gender-flattering, even a kind of de-generation, as erasure of genres.

Cobwebs and tattoos

Amongst the most common and peculiar tattoos, Skinheads use cobwebs. Almost all the members of this movement which chose to tattoo themselves have a cobweb on their body, generally on their shoulders or arms. This tattoo actually has become an identification code for Skinheads, above all the other possible individual meanings which can have for every single person: they get that tattoo because all the other members got that tattoo, no need of explanations or further interpretations. It is not surprising indeed that when members are asked about the meaning of that cobweb, answers are just a mere attempt to rationalise ("it is a spider's nest, which is ready to trap the foreign fly"; "it is the symbol of unemployment: nobody wants to hire a Skinhead and cobwebs grow on us").

It is difficult to piece together the genealogy of this sign and to understand how, exactly, it arrived in Skinheads' culture. Unfortunately, it is also hard to establish since when it became an identification tag. Tattoo practice was really common, since the middle 1800, amongst English working class males (but was less in use among those living far from big cities): recurrent signs were patriotic, nationalistic, religious and, more rarely, erotic. Those

tattoos represented, through peculiar codes, all the different stages of individual's life (first job, military service...) or particular group's membership. The cobweb tattoo, however, never appeared before half a century ago. This symbol was instead very common in the neo-gothic subculture (*gothic, punk-gothic, fetish gothic* and so on), which often refers to dark, grave, generally anti-Christian and satanic referenced elements. It is not clear if it has been imported from neo-gothic style to Skinheads' culture, and, eventually, in which way. It is possible that the cobweb symbol comes from a common previous, maybe esoteric, background which lately appeared in both cultures as sign of disapproval and protest. The neo-gothic cobweb is, however, different from the Skinhead's one, because it is often asymmetrical, developing along the body's shape, mixing with other draws or linking to them. Skinhead's one is, instead, absolutely symmetrical, localized, generally circular or oval. It doesn't adapt to body's shapes, but it follows its own coherence and internal symmetry. Skinheads' cobwebs are, let's say, self-contained, and are, probably, a wish of order, precision, spatial coherence, homogeneity. Moreover, cobweb has a net-shape, symbol of a linked community, Skinheads' one obviously, which can refer to their will of building solid relationships within their own brotherhood. In the end, the cobweb, especially those tattooed in a well-defined skin area, is a symbol which immediately reminds of space. For a better understanding of this sentence, it is necessary to compare it to other types of tattoos. Let's take, for instance, Chinese or Japanese ideograms, which recently has become really common to make up sentences or phrases. Those tattoos are deliberately written in a code which is not understandable unless the reader owns the key to do them, and which is, insofar, an esoteric code, used to reveal or fix (literally, on the skin), a truth which cannot be said in the commonly used language. Ideograms looks for a dichotomy between a public language and an elite language, between a daily communication and an esoteric one, which is idealized on their skin, instead of being written. Those tattoos refer to a truth beyond the common one, a truth which cannot be revealed with words (it is, in fact, written using ideograms). Providing another example, we can consider animals or flowers tattoos, or any other kind of natural element, which are synonymous of a desire of harmony or, in contrast, with a regret for a nature which is not as harmonic as expected. In any case, they are Romantic projections of a wish of harmony.

If ideograms recall a mysterious and unpronounceable truth and natural symbols recall a romantic nostalgia, then cobweb symbolize a space which need to be limited, circumscribed and, eventually, defended.

Space and violence

This comparison let us understand better, at least in part, the meaning of a cobweb of Skinheads: it expresses the relationship with their own space, which is so close for them, to be symbolically printed on their skin. It is a zone to preserve, to be maintained undamaged, uncontaminated, free from the unacceptable transformations that modernity is forcing to accept. The space of a community, the space or maybe it would be better to call it 'territory', is the practical element which gives the community a concrete reality. One of the essential aspect of Skinheads' movement is, in fact, its emphasis on their territory. In England, as much as in big cities, Skinheads organized their groups according to the territorial bases of their neighborhoods, identifying themselves with specific zones. Boundary limits are clearly defined with, for instance, graffiti on walls, which specify which group has power over which territory, and mark off their area differentiation it from the other groups' ones. In those territories there are focal points – colonnade, squares, pubs... - which are the main places used by Skinheads for the internal group meetings. Outside big English cities this relationship with neighborhoods is far less pronounced: generally, it becomes a relationship with the whole city overall. Each city becomes the area under the control of a specific group. Football support, as well, is an important method to build territorial identity and , at the same time, a powerful way to organize groups. In English metropolis, where there are, in general, more than one team in the same city, football supporters are organized trough areas even if very often distinctions

between teams don't follow exactly territorial boundaries, or at least not as much as Skinheads feel them³. Sometimes football support is the instrument used to build 'brotherhood' between groups from different zones.

Football support, including its violence, is one of the moments that Skinheads use to express their relationship with territory. Mass violence is another one, which Skinheads perceive as a form of self-defense against those who, somehow, seem to embody a threat to their space: the attackers who endanger their territorial identity. *Paki-Bashing*, in England, which are violent aggressions against Pakistan and Indian community members (who are, according to their point of view, so 'recognizably' different), spread in Europe, as an aggression against every kind of foreign person, different from Skinheads' reference models for their behavior, clothing style or social conditions (black people, immigrants from other countries, tramps...). In order to defend the homogeneity culture of their territory, Skinheads are pushed into action against those who, for different reasons related to their physical appearance, become their scapegoats. On the list of their enemies are homosexuals, and especially those who show their sexual preferences without hiding them. Homosexual fight, known in England as *Queen-Bashing*, is their reaction against the erosion of traditional values such as virility, and is just one of the hated-groups who, in different ways (see above Hippies' long hair), are different from the values that Skinheads want to defend.

The territorial community myth

Territoriality, collective solidarity and virility are the three methods, linked to each other, which Skinheads use to recreate a community model which they believe existed in the past.

The community Skinheads dream about, the one they want to defend from foreign invasion and consumerist homologation, is a community which simply doesn't exist: *the skinhead style does not revive the community in a real sense; the post-war decline of the bases of that community had removed it as a real source of solidarity; the skinheads had to use an image of what that community was as the basis of their style. They were the 'dispossessed inheritors'; they received a tradition which had been deprived of its real social bases. The themes and imagery still persisted, but the reality was in a state of decline and disappearance* (Clarke 1991: 100).

The material and social basis necessary to build that kind of community, even supposing that it ever existed with those features imagined by Skinheads, are no longer really available and the social structure has deeply changed.

The clean and healthy world that existed ages ago, imagined as the one of the old strong working class or the laborious Italian pre-industrial province, does not exist anymore. The simple, rustic, powerful lifestyle that Skinheads assign to past generations is just a mental projection, an abstract fantasy far from the reality: *They believe that they have the same stereotyped prejudices against immigrants and aliens as they believe their parents have and had, but they play these roles outside of the context of the community experienced by their parents* (Daniel & McGuire 1972: 67).

The ground, the community, the Nation (as much as the parochialism spread following the football support), are mythicized and transferred into an ideal and unchangeable dimension, which assumes the role of saving (as it happens in myths) people from evil, compromises and incomprehensible complexity of the modern world. There is a nostalgia of absolute in Skinheads' movement, a tendency to the idealization which is strong, but referred to a ghost. Closed in their own mythical ideal of a pure community, they are not able to accept anything new, they do not find any other way to act than a sterile violence. There is an intellectual lack of understanding with their contemporary society and the ultra-extremism has become their only ideology. The values they

3 It's clear that on one hand there are administrative delimitations of neighborhoods, the ones officially considered by football clubs, and on the other hand there are delimitations born from people's lives, which can consider some streets, places or zones which administratively belong to another neighborhood, 'their own places'.

promote do not become positive values of equality, social justice or freedom, and Skinheads remain victims of their own particularistic perspectives. The defense of their ideal community became an escape from the reality and Skinheads - unable to transform their present, facing social conditions they cannot act in - look towards the past, dreaming of impossible alternatives. Nostalgia for cultural homogeneity becomes racism, patriotism becomes exclusivist nationalism or parochialism: working class heirs hymn Hitler's national socialism. Although their flaunted opposition against modernity, Skinheads are, in fact, the other face of the medal. They are unable to build up an authentic tradition nor to link themselves to a living tradition. Skinheads just produce a mannered traditionalism.

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