

SKINHEADS: THE ISSUE OF STYLE AND AUTHENTICITY

Mustafa Đelilbašić¹
mustafa.djelilbasic@hotmail.com

UDK/UDC 316.77 / 7.05 / 2.6
Pregledni članak

Abstract: In this paper we have dealt with the topic of the skinhead subculture. Before analysing the phenomenon of the subculture, the first issue that we discussed were the notions of culture and hegemony and how they can be understood in relation with subcultures in general. We found out in every society the ruling ideas are always dictated by the most powerful and richest class, i.e. those with the most material wealth. This fact led us to discuss the notion of hegemony, and we have concluded that, regardless of the power of the ruling groups in society, hegemony has to be won, reproduced and sustained all the time. This is the point at which our analysis of hegemony and dominant ideology is relevant for analysis of the skinhead subculture. The subculture went from being a relatively unified one during the 1960s to being a fractured subculture with different groups within it trying to establish hegemony and to assert their ideas as something that is inherent to the subculture itself. This conclusion paved the way for us to point out that the conflicted groups each tried to establish their own respective identities as the ones that are exclusively authentic in the skinhead subculture. However, we also saw that the ideas of the far-right skinheads are the ones that are dominant in the subculture. We also concluded that it is the only thing that actually links the skinhead community together. For reasons discussed in the paper, the subculture is fractured in terms of the ideology advocated by different groups within it, but all of them nevertheless asserted their identity through one and the same style. This is why Timothy S. Brown narrowed the skinhead subculture to the notion of the *style community*.

Introduction

The main goal of this work will be to explore the identity of the skinhead subculture, with a particular emphasis on the way how that identity changed over the course of time.

Firstly, we shall provide the theoretical framework for our analysis, and in doing so Dick Hebdige's *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* will be the main reference point. The concept of culture will be the first one to be presented, and after that we shall try to see if and to what extent we can apply the theoretical concepts related to culture with our analysis of the skinhead subculture. The terms ideology and hegemony will also be touched upon in this work.

Then a historical description of how the subculture came into existence in the United Kingdom during the 1960s will be provided, followed by an analysis of its development in the following decades.

The focal point, however, of this work's analysis will be the issue of authenticity within the skinhead subculture. We shall also inspect if and how the subculture – and subcultures in general – may be in some way related to the mainstream culture as well.

Finally, we shall try to define and describe the term *homology*, and then try to establish if the skinhead subculture can be said to be a homologous one.

The Notion of Culture

First of all, we have to define culture. The very definition of culture is a matter of contention since its meaning has changed through the centuries. We shall, however, focus on the ones that are relevant for our analysis of subcultures. According to Dick Hebdige (1979, 6), in the Victorian Era culture could either refer to a standard of aesthetic excellence, meaning "everything that has been thought and said in the world", or to a "particular way of life which expresses certain meanings and values not only in art and learning, but also in institutions and ordinary behaviour. The analysis of culture, from such a definition, is the clarification of the meanings and values implicit and explicit in a particular way of life, a particular culture." (Hebdige, 1979, 6)

Such a definition opened the possibility for the term culture to have a much broader range as it encompassed "all the characteristic activities and interests of people".

Roland Barthes in his 1957 book *Mythologies* embraced the notion of culture as something that goes "beyond the library, the opera-house and the theatre" and encompasses everything that we can see in everyday life. However, Barthes' own idea is that even everyday life brims with a significance which is more insidious and more systematically organized. He first explained that "myth is a type of speech" and then went on to point to a set of rules, codes and conventions that the most powerful groups in society use in order to impose their meanings and (interpretations) as perfectly natural and rational. They do that using the rhetoric of common sense, which can in some way or the other be recognized in disparate phenomena such as a wrestling match, a writer on holiday, a tourist-guide book. (Hebdige 1979, 9)

The ideology imposed by the powerful groups, according to Barthes, is capable of assuming the aura of anonymity and becoming something that people are not even aware of. However, before proceeding to analyse the skinhead subculture, it is necessary to describe the term "ideology" in more detail first.

Ideology

Complex societies such as British function along the lines of divided or specialized labour. That, however, raises the following question: which specific groups and classes exert the most influence in the society and which specific ideologies represent them?

"The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it. The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas; hence of the relationships which make the one

class the ruling class, therefore the ideas of its dominance”, Karl Marx argued in this *The German Ideology* in 1846. (Hebdige 1979, 15)

What Marx essentially says is that the most powerful groups in society simply decide how the social world will look like. They define the ways things are perceived in society. They are the driving force behind creating an ideology that people unconsciously accept as universal and natural. The ideas of the ruling class always come under the guise of common sense, thus being able to impose their definition of the world onto the whole society.

However, such a dominance or hegemony is not something that is a permanent state of affairs, because it has to be reproduced and reaffirmed over and over again. That is the way dominant social groups can maintain authority over the subordinated groups in society. What we should remember, though, is that hegemonic power “can never be permanently exercised by the same alliance of class fractions”. There is always a possibility of questioning the universally given and accepted truths. They can be deconstructed, demystified and given new meanings, paving the way for people to perceive the world and objects in it in a different way.

How is this related to the skinhead subculture? It is related by the simple fact that any subculture can be analysed in a rather similar manner as the mainstream culture. Dominant groups in subcultures – including the skinheads – can exert more influence upon the others, define what the subculture’s ideology is and what the signs representing their subculture actually stand for.

History of the Skinhead Subculture

The skinhead subculture emerged in Britain in the late 1960s as a multicultural synthesis revolving around fashion and music (Brown 2004, 157). The original skinheads emerged from the mod subculture, which was formed in the early 1960s. The mods were working-class in origin, but

some of its members looked forward to leaving the realm of the working class and joining the white-collar, office-based work in a bank or advertising firm. This was not a satisfactory for those mods who wished to emphasize the more proletarian aspect of their look, as opposed to the hippie style of “swinging London” that some mods had begun to adopt. The more proletarian-oriented mods began to cut their hair shorter and replaced their suits and shoes with jeans and heavy boots (Brown 2004, 157).

These mods were the predecessors of the first skinheads. The first generation of skinheads embraced the reggae music as the central element of their identity. The reggae music was introduced into Britain by black performers from Jamaica who openly courted the skinheads and thus made it easier for themselves to kick-start their careers in Britain. However, the tide of the first iteration of the skinhead subculture ebbed by the early 1970s, and it was not until the late 1970s that the subculture saw its rebirth under the influence of punk rock. It was in this period that some skinheads embraced right-wing political views and that the subculture as a whole came to be known as the one that espouses extremist political views.

By 1980 the term *skinhead* was almost synonymous with terms such as racist, fascist, right-wing and even neo-Nazi. Reasons for the subculture’s transformation from the one centred around appreciation for black music to the one that is denounced as right-wing and extremist are complicated. First of all, the skinheads of the first generation were apolitical indeed, but there were some hints that in some way pointed to the radicalisation and politicisation that followed in the 1970s. There was a sense of racial animosity even in the 1960s, and some skinheads were used to victimising Asian immigrants, particularly Pakistanis. On the political arena, some laws were passed to curb immigration, while leading Conservative Party politicians, such as Enoch Powell, warned of a possibility of a race war unless Britain did something to stop immigration. Such a political situation provided the basis for the relations between skinheads and black immigrants to turn sour, which resulted in skinheads’ abandoning the reggae music as the focal element of their identity. The image of working-class masculinity, adopted from the parent culture, was always prone to being linked with the issue of racism. All of this points to one simple conclusion: the

skinhead subculture had always been prone to becoming contaminated with right-wing political ideas, and the subculture's turn to the right of the political spectrum in the late 1970s was not much of a surprise.

The Issue of Authenticity

The struggle for authenticity, i.e. proving and fighting who actually represents the real skinhead identity happened during the 1980s. The original skinhead scene collapsed by the early 1970s and it was not until late 1970s that the subculture was revived under the influence of punk rock. The skinheads of the second wave started to court the right-wing political ideas. Those ideas came to be embraced by a significant number of skinheads, resulting in a politicisation of the skinhead scene, which was not the case previously. This shift produced a crisis of identity among skinheads. Two dominant groups emerged in the 1980s – right-wing skinheads that disregarded or ignored the subculture's black roots on the one hand and left-wing skinheads who appreciated their roots as something that defines their identity. Such a schism opened the way for the two groups to conflict about the very essence of the subculture. This is the point where we can link the analysis of subculture with the ideas presented and communicated by Dick Hebdige in his *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. The struggle between different discourses is perfectly linked with the idea that hegemony has to be "won, reproduced and sustained" by the groups that are dominant at a certain point in time. (Hebdige 1979, 16)

Perhaps this is why a number of skinheads, reacting against the radicalisation of the skinhead scene, founded the Skinheads Against Racial Prejudice (SHARP). Due to the fact that the media and the public across the world, particularly in North America, often portray skinheads as neo-Nazis, a few skinhead groups emerged calling themselves anti-fascists and anti-racists. The most important of such groups is Skinheads Against Racial Prejudice, founded in 1987 in New York as a response to the radicalisation of the skinhead scene. 1982 saw the growing of the White Power Movement based on racism and political extremism, and it is precisely because of this that some skinheads decided to try to change the image of a skinhead subculture based on the ideas of

racism and political extremism. Another anti-racist skinhead group emerged in 1993, dubbed the Red and Anarchist Skinheads, and promoted a far-left radical agenda.

We should also mention that even some members of the gay community in the United States actually identify themselves with the skinhead community, which is probably a reaction against the “mainstream” racist, masculine, and homophobic American skinhead scene.

All of this leads us to the conclusion that in today’s world skinheads are a very diverse subculture with many different iterations across the world. The skinhead subculture is fractured and divided to such an extent that the very term *skinhead* does not everywhere and for everyone mean one and the same thing. However, the fact is that the dominant image of skinheads around the world – and particularly in Germany and North America – revolves around a racist, fascist, and even neo-Nazi identity that most of them actually espouse. This, though, does not deny the fact that the problem of authenticity within the skinhead subculture has been solved, precisely because the hegemonic power “can never be permanently exercised by the same alliance of class fractions” and therefore has to be “won, reproduced, and sustained”.

The Issue of Style

“Every sign is subject to the criteria of ideological evaluation... The domain of ideology coincides with the domain of signs”. This is one of the quotations that Hebdige (1979, 13) uses to explain the way every ideology is represented by signs. Every sign has a meaning which can change over time of course and they create maps of meaning that we can associate with a certain ideology that is dominant in society or subculture for that matter.

Since the 1980s, as we have explained, saw a division of the skinhead scene into two main groups, some changes inevitably followed. The right-wing scene, for the sake of reflecting the schism from the left-wing scene which appreciated the subculture’s black roots, gradually modified their style so as to represent the way they understood the world around them. The original skinheads’ most recognizable and distinctive elements in terms of clothing were “tight Levi’s jean,

StarPrest pants, Ben Sherman button-down and Freed Perry tennis shirts, work boots, suspenders, and Levi’s or Harrington’s jackets”. (Brown 2004, 158). Most of all, the most important element was cropped hair. This style signified a masculine, working-class skinhead look that was recognizable to the wider public. However, even clothing became a site of conflict once the skinhead scene came to be divided. The right-wing ones took their clothing style to the utmost extreme by wearing taller boots instead of the ones they had worn previously, military jackets instead of more civilian looks, and it was exactly in this period of late 1970s that skinheads became to be known as bald. As we have pointed out – ideology corresponds to the domain of signs. The new style of right-wing skinheads was a reflection of the new ideology that they adopted. Being a skinhead for them meant that one should reflect it in their outward appearance.

However, political divisions can never be fully represented in style. Outward appearance cannot be fully equated to a political viewpoint. The example of SHARP is the best illustration of this fact. Based on their outward appearance, many people would actually mistake them for racists because their appearance is similar on the surface: both of them can be recognised by shaved heads, denim jeans, lace up boots, button-down shirts and suspenders. This is a proof that, regardless of the meaning that the skinhead look might have, being a skinhead essentially comes down to adopting a certain outward appearance. Perhaps this is why it was possible, for instance, for some members of the gay community to find a way to identify themselves with the skinhead identity. The fact that some gay people could find a way to identify with it is a proof that certain political or ideological beliefs are not the prerequisite for being a skinhead.

The Issue of Homology

When dealing with the topic of subcultures in general, it is impossible not to mention the term *homology*. It refers to all the elements of a subcultural identity – music, fashion, drugs, politics etc. (Brown 2004, 169). If all of these elements fit together as a meaningful whole, then we can say that a subculture is homologous. If we analysed the hippie subculture, for instance, there would be no problem describing it as homologous because all the elements that make it up make a meaningful and sensible whole. This logic can only be partially applied to the skinhead subculture

because the skinhead look, as we have already demonstrated, is open to more than one single meaning and interpretation. The skinhead subculture of this first generation can be said to have been homologous; however, the problem arose during the late 1970s when the skinhead scene was politicised, creating a rift in the scene due to the fact that not all skinheads agreed on what the group’s identity was. The subculture’s scene from the late 1970s onwards was not unified at all, and its members were unable to agree on what the elements of their identity actually meant and stood for.

Which of the two narratives has managed so far to impose itself as the dominant one in the eyes of the public? Do we today consider the skinhead subculture as racist or anti-racist and apolitical? Probably most of us would identify skinheads with right-wing political extremism. The subculture was not politicized in the right-wing direction without resistance, though. As we have already mentioned, SHARP, a founded in in New York in 1986, tried to reclaim the “real” skinhead identity from those who managed to encrypt right-wing political extremism to the subculture. They tried to shift the focus from the sphere of politics to culture, rejecting any idea of siding with any political agenda. Jamaican culture was proudly emphasised as the root of the skinhead identity, thus implying that racism cannot in any way be something that is acceptable to its followers. SHARP tried to avoid politics as much as possible and base the subculture’s identity around style.

Their attempt to transform the skinhead subculture’s identity has so far failed, because the process of the subculture’s development has gone so far that it is impossible to revert it to any of its previous iterations. It has, spatially and temporally, gone through profound changes and became associated with something that would be very hard to erase. In Germany, for example, socio-historical influences have made it impossible for the apolitical identity of skinheads to come to the surface. The German National Democratic Party, a neo-Nazi party in its essence, has managed to secure the support of many violent skinheads who espouse the same values as they do, thus contributing to the infamous image of skinheads that most people today have about them. Is it possible to change this situation and to revert the skinhead subculture back to its roots? No, but it is theoretically possible that the subculture that we today know as racist and neo-Nazi might one

day be synonymous with something completely different. Hegemony has to be "won, reproduced and maintained" all the time, otherwise it may collapse and disappear. For now, however, any apolitical skinhead identity will be hard to achieve.

Conclusion

In this paper we have dealt with the topic of the skinhead subculture. Before analysing the phenomenon of the subculture, the first issue that we discussed were the notions of culture and hegemony and how they can be understood in relation with subcultures in general.

We found out in every society the ruling ideas are always dictated by the most powerful and richest class, i.e. those with the most material wealth. This fact led us to discuss the notion of hegemony, and we have concluded that, regardless of the power of the ruling groups in society, hegemony has to be won, reproduced and sustained all the time. This is the point at which our analysis of hegemony and dominant ideology is relevant for analysis of the skinhead subculture. The subculture went from being a relatively unified one during the 1960s to being a fractured subculture with different groups within it trying to establish hegemony and to assert their ideas as something that is inherent to the subculture itself.

This conclusion paved the way for us to point out that the conflicted groups each tried to establish their own respective identities as the ones that are exclusively authentic in the skinhead subculture. However, we also saw that the ideas of the far-right skinheads are the ones that are dominant in the subculture, regardless of the attempts of the apolitical current within the subculture to dismiss the issue of politics completely. For now, the extremist current has managed to succeed in imposing its identity as the dominant one in the subculture.

Finally, we analysed the notion of style and concluded that it is the only thing that actually links the skinhead community together. For reasons discussed in the paper, the subculture is fractured in terms of the ideology advocated by different groups within it, but all of them

nevertheless asserted their identity through one and the same style. This is why Timothy S. Brown narrowed the skinhead subculture to the notion of the *style community*, whereas the dominant ideas within it will continue to be won, reproduced and sustained by the most powerful groups among the skinheads.

References

Brown, Timothy S. 2004. "Subcultures, Pop Music and Politics: Skinheads and "Nazi Rock" in England and Germany." *Journal of Social History*: 157-178.

Hebdige, Dick. 1979. *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. London: Methuen & Co. Ltd.

The Undisciplined. 2014. *Skinhead: The Evolution of a Subculture and Society's View Thereof*. Accessed February 20, 2018. <https://theundisciplined.com/2014/07/04/skinhead-the-evolution-of-a-subculture-and-societys-view-thereof>

