



Fangen, Katrine (2003) «A Death Mask of Masculinity: The Brotherhood of Norwegian Right-Wing Skinheads»

Chapter 11 in: Søren Ervø and Thomas Johansson (eds.) (2003), *Among Men: Moulding Masculinities, vol. 1*. London: Ashgate

Chapter 11

A Death Mask of Masculinity: The Brotherhood of Norwegian Right-Wing Skinheads

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At a party arranged by the right-wing skinhead subculture in Norway, a band is playing, and young men gather in front of the stage. Some men are drunk, and have difficulty standing upright. From time to time, the men stretch out their right arm in a salute to the band. Some men bang their heads, and others hold their arms around each other. One boy pushes another into the mass, stumbles and falls, and is stamped on by the others. A friend pulls him out of the mass and he stands confused. Later in the evening, several boys remove their T-shirts, revealing their bare upper bodies, tattooed with Vikings and nationalist symbols.

At the first glance, this symbiosis of community and violence might seem like a dislocated and archaic construction of masculinity. For example, Clarke (1976) talks of the skinhead subculture as the magical recovery of past working-class community. Willis (1977), on the other hand, sees racism and violence as distinct parts of working-class young people's counterculture in school. It is common for both of these writers and the other researchers from the so-called Birmingham school of youth research (CCCS: Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies) to see racism and violence as distinct parts of the "shop-floor culture." They say that the original working-class communities have been broken up, and that working-class young people reconstruct different features of what they imagine to be typically working-class by their subcultural participation. Such subcultures constitute a bricolage where elements from different origins are brought together to produce a new unity, expressing a protest against society, but at the same time reproducing core values of their own class. According to the CCCS researchers, class is still a major structure which serves to distinguish people, and they show that protest subcultures

might express conflicts hidden in contemporary society, especially processes of unequal opportunities for young people.

The thesis of class as a major structuring principle in the selection of who will succeed within the school system, and who will not, is supported by the extensive quantitative research of Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) and their colleagues. The claim to take responsibility for one's own life, which opens up many possibilities, might in many respects be considered a myth rather than a reality. There are still considerable class differences in the range of possible choices, the school often being more important as the very institution that selects the already privileged from the already excluded, than as an institution supporting equal opportunities for everyone. This holds true for more clear-cut class societies like France and the UK, but as shown by Jørgensen (1994), some of these processes are highly relevant also in Norway. Young men who act aggressively, who drop out of school, and who commit violence or express antagonism against foreigners might be understood also, as shown in the studies of Willis (1977) and Hebdige (1979), as constructing an image of working-class masculinity.

This thesis stands somewhat in contrast to the way Giddens (1991) and Ziehe (1981) describe the processes of individualization and self-actualization, as being typical of late modernity. Ziehe uses the term individualization to point to the current emphasis on the responsibility of the individual to construct an identity. As Ziehe describes this process, tradition and class no longer determine the identity of young people. They become responsible for their own choices more than ever before. This leads to an intensified vulnerability in young people, but, on the other hand, it provides them with a hitherto unknown freedom to choose their own lifestyles. According to Ziehe, this process might be achieved by cultural experimentation, that is, using the modern to create something new. Another solution is to become neo-conservative by idealizing the past. Here, Ziehe's argument is parallel to the CCCS researchers' interpretation of skinheads as recovering a class identity that no longer has a material basis, and therefore must be communicated in a symbolic way. The skinheads idealize a lumpen identity (Hebdige, 1979) and they create what Clarke (1976) interprets as a magical recovery of community.

Giddens (1991) does indeed see class as a structuring principle in late modernity, although in his discussion of self-identity and the consequences for the individual of modernity, class seems to be less important. According to Giddens, the uttermost consequences of modernity hit us harder than ever before. Our era is defined by a heightened risk and at the

same time a threat to the feeling of ontological security and trust. Identity is not something passively inherited from one generation to another, but rather it has the quality of being a project which continuously must be constructed and reconstructed during the life-span. Since changes between life-phases are no longer regulated by ceremonies, an important task of the individual is to tackle the identity crisis that life offers. The popularity of self-therapy books and courses are, according to Giddens, a mark of the centrality of this aspect of mastering such threats to the feeling of a congruent self and the feeling of ontological security.

Ziehe, like Giddens, rejects the view that we are living in a postmodern society. According to Ziehe, modernity creates a horizon of possibilities, as the individual is expected to choose and form his or her own life and identity. This also leads to insecurity. As with Giddens's focus on the individual working toward self-actualisation, Ziehe pays most of his attention to youths who creatively (in the aesthetic sense of the term) use the diversity of lifestyle choices in their cultural experimentation. A failure in the discussions of both Giddens and Ziehe is that they do not focus much on the importance of class in defining who is profiting in this rapidly changing and highly pluralistic era.

Class still plays a major factor in distinguishing between those who successfully profit from the break with traditions, and those who are more directly hit by the insecurity of our time. Bourdieu shows that the view that school and education are democratic institutions that provide all youths with equal opportunities, is totally wrong. On the contrary, the education system is the very system that serves to select those already privileged, from those who already were excluded from the dominant classes. This finding is supported by ethnographic studies from the CCCS, such as Willis's study of counter-school-culture, and by Norwegian studies like Jørgensen (1994).

The problem with studies such as the one by Willis is not the failure to recognize the significance of class, but rather the failure to recognize the complexity of masculinity, and how class today is constructed in diverse ways. As shown by Connell (1995), working-class boys may often come from more postmodern families, in the sense that the mother is the breadwinner, than do middle-class boys, and boys with almost equal backgrounds may construct their "working classness" in a multitude of ways, many of them breaking with traditional expectations of what it means to be working class.

In Willis's study, racism is seen as one important quality of the proletarian "shop-floor culture". Connell shows that many other qualities

are present in the various ways through which working-class identity might be constructed. Deterministic socialization theories fail to show the more paradoxical expressions of class. Also, as pointed out by Connell, many working-class boys today do not orient themselves toward a future on the shop-floor. Many of them face a future marked by unemployment, and therefore they stay within their subcultural lifestyle project which gives no hope for future working-class jobs, or they orient themselves toward educated middle-class jobs. Racism might of course be prevalent in all classes, but is perhaps most directly expressed within the working-class. A study by Pedersen (1996) shows that working-class young people express more prejudices toward foreigners than do middle-class young people. It is possible, however, that the racism of the middle-class is not shown up in a survey.

According to Bauman (1991), racism is a feature of modernity, whereas postmodernity is marked by tolerance. The project of modernity is to rule out ambivalence, and within such a project the Holocaust was the most tragic expression of the modern world. The modern idea of equality means that everything which is not equal must either be assimilated, deported or exterminated. Bauman, in contrast to Ziehe and Giddens, is talking of current society as being postmodern, but at the same time he says that modernity is still with us (p. 270). In Bauman's view, what is new in the current era, is that we are now able to look at modernity from a distance, discovering the impossibility of modernity. In these terms, racist youth subcultures such as the community of right-wing skinheads represent those who still believe in modernity, those who do not want to accept the possibility of living with ambivalence. By celebrating a rigid division between us and them, right-wing skinheads actively reject the more "postmodern" identity projects of individuals who accept the diversity and ambivalence of multiple belongings.

My analysis is inspired by Connell, Wetherell and others who see masculinity as something men negotiate in ongoing situations. A boy is not passively transformed into a man. Rather, all through his life he has to construct and reconstruct his sense of maleness as resolution to dilemmas concerning expectations from others (both men and women) and concerning the power relations he enters. According to Connell, masculinity is a set of choices about what to wear, what to look like, and how to behave in social situations. Even though females constitute about a third of this subculture,¹ it seems that, in many ways, it is male-dominated and defined. Since I have analyzed the social project of right-wing females elsewhere, to reveal the gendered quality of the identity project of these

skinheads, I will now analyze how the male participants of the subculture verbalize the aspect of being a "real man," and I will present an interpretation of certain situations in which they actively construct their versions of masculinity.

By using this analytical frame as a guide for what to look for, I will ask what signals right-wing males give to the outside world by the clothes they wear, by the way they relate to each other, by the way they walk, and more explicitly by the words they use to define themselves in contrast to other men. According to Connell's terminology, right-wing skinheads might be considered a version of marginalized masculinity. In another essay, I discuss the life histories of some of these young men. They come from the working class or the lower part of the *petite bourgeois*. In terms of their own occupation, they are all either working-class or unemployed, living on the dole. They are quite similar to the men discussed by Connell under the heading "live fast and die young." Like such men, they have no expectation of the kind of stable employment around which working-class family life earlier was organized. In this way, they differ from "the lads" described by Paul Willis: they do not participate in a violent, racist counterculture as a preparation for a work-life on the shopfloor, rather they participate because they see no future in the working market. Their participation in a counterculture provides their life with the excitement, community and feeling of honor that they cannot find elsewhere.

My aim is to find out what kind of masculinity they are negotiating, and more generally how a right-wing skinhead male is "made." What should he look like and how should he act, in order to fit in with the others? The way these young males construct their social identity as white "nationalist" men is simultaneously a response to the way people outside their own collective define and react to them. Identity is always defined in contrast to those one does not identify with. However, as pointed out by recent social constructionist writers, most persons belong to many different social categories, and might often feel contradictions within themselves as a result of diverging constraints that their manifold belongings lead to.

When putting some of these lines of thought together, we could say that in the course of modernity masculinity has been questioned, partly as a result of the critiques put forward by the women's movement. At the same time, the working class has continuously been changing. The orientation of people has evolved from collectivism toward individualism. The ritualized version of masculinity among right-wing skinheads is one possible solution to modern dilemmas. The skinhead part of the right-wing subculture can be understood as one typical example of the crisis within masculinity,

described by several authors. Connell (1995) speaks of a crisis in the gender order as a whole, with implications for masculinities. This crisis may provoke attempts to restore a dominant masculinity. Theweleit (1987) interprets the sexual politics of Fascism in this way. Gibson (1994) has described similar processes in his study of “paramilitary culture.”

In other words, ritualized, dominant, violent forms of masculinity can be interpreted not only as ancient masculinities, displaced in modern society. Rather one can see them as distinct solutions to the dilemmas of modern societies, and the processes of individualization leading to ontological insecurity and the need to cope with the threats against a congruent self-feeling. Such ritualizations are seen in the skinhead dance, drinking, pain, and so on. In this way, a feeling of ontological security is created, which partly takes the form of being a feeling or experience of having an identity. It is the feeling of the lack of identity which leads to various attempts to ritualize and thus bind masculinity. These attempts might take perverse forms, and thus lead to a death-mask of masculinity.

This article examines the ritualized ways in which Norwegian right-wing skinheads construct masculinity. The analysis is based upon material gathered from one year of participant observation during 1993-94, interviews from the period 1993-97, and written material about right-wing skinheads.

The verbalization of an archetypal honor ideal

Images of skinheads vs. middle-class men

The clear-cut division between us and them is seen in the way that right-wing skinheads define their own subculture:

The skinhead movement emerged among white, national workers in England – not among international students and “self-haters”! Skinheads represent white pride and – in contrast to punks, most skinheads have ordinary work. The styles are also different, as the punks look like a ... Christmas tree ..., whereas skinheads dress like militant workers! Workers that are neither communists nor anarchists (*Einherjer*, No. 1, 1996).

In this way, the skinheads link honor to the social categories with which they define themselves, and invert other categories into representing self-hatred. Thus, being white, being working-class, being militant, being national, and – as might be seen as an internal contrast to some of the

former – being ordinary, are all aspects of being honorable. This contrast being something else, militant rebels or warriors, and at the same time being ordinary, one of the people, is typical of the way in which right-wing skinheads present themselves. Broad categories, such as race and nation, provide them with honor, and make them winners (warriors), rather than losers (victims). By being aggressors, they are assured of not being victims. This self-identity is contrasted to their definition of men with education and international experience. The latter have an ethos more different from themselves than anyone else. In addition, such men are those who have the power to define right-wing skinheads negatively, for example in terms of social inability. To redefine the power of these men becomes crucial for right-wing skinheads. Therefore, they invert the aspect of being international and educated into being a self-hater, being a man who suppresses his instincts. Middle-class men in this way are identified as weaklings, whereas working-class men represent true masculinity.

The problem of people today is going from words to deed! What right do they have to criticise and judge us, these pigs [de svina] who only think of filling their stomachs! It is the foremost men of action who are really free and alive! ... What people in general only slightly dare to admit to themselves we shout out in the street! In the street, we must fight because that is where the real reality is! A reality which the politician pigs and the couch potatoes think only exists in movies! People accuse skins of being rowdy, but we only claim our right: WHITE POWER! (*Ragnarok*, 1993).

This quotation also redefines true men as men who act and who fight. Men who always stay inside, middle-class men, are unable to contest their status to know anything of “the real reality,” the reality of the street. This is in line with Bourdieu (1993) saying that masculinity, defined in terms of physical strength (body capital), is the ground pillar of the identity of the dominated classes. These young men exaggerate their abilities in the sphere of bodily action because their power to define is lacking. To tackle the vulnerability they feel as not fitting into the hegemonic areas of society, the feeling of bodily management (Giddens, 1991) becomes crucial.

The emphasis on the warrior image might, however, seem to be a kind of dislocated masculinity image in today's Western societies. However, as pointed out by Morgan (1994, p. 165), the warrior, despite far-reaching political, social and technological changes, still seems to be a key symbol of masculinity, as shown in its central place in films. Dominating the street by means of physical force is a way to achieve power and dignity. “TV-

slaves” represent femininity only partly because they do not partake in the contest of masculinity which is played out in the street. The association of “men of action” with the street indirectly defines the antithesis of the street versus the home; the latter is distinguished as the feminine sphere, and thus men who stay at home (even though they watch TV rather than cook) are unmanly men. This point is also highlighted by Back (1994) in his study of racist youths in Britain. For them, he argues, the home symbolizes the feminine sphere and a social boundness. It is important to add here a point made by Nancy Cott (in Brod, 1994, p. 88) that such constructions of geographically separated male and female spheres are ideological constructions, not distinct physical sites.

The Vikings – or the ethos of real men

Another way that right-wing skinheads conceptualize the ethos of “real men,” and thus legitimize their own brute masculinity, is by referring to the conduct of the ancient Nordic Vikings. The Vikings serve particularly well to illuminate the link between brute masculinity and honor:

Fighting today costs, and everyone must sacrifice something. Those who are at the front-line must receive all the support they need! WE MUST STAY TOGETHER; OUR BROTHERHOOD IS HOLY! We are hated and loved, comrades. We live like real Vikings at any rate! Stand up and continue the fight. Sooner or later we will be strong! (*Ragnarok*).²

To fight, to be hated by others, and to stay together in a tight brotherhood – this is their image of how the Vikings behaved.³ In their view the Vikings were strong because they stayed together and supported each other, because they fought their enemies, and because they sacrificed their personal interests for those of the group. Left alone, even a Viking might be vulnerable. Together with his comrades, however, he will (sooner or later) be strong. According to one skinhead, writing in the skinhead fanzine *Bootboys* (1992),⁴ the moral rules of *Hávamál* are as current today as they were “for our ancestors during their era.” *Hávamál* serves as a guide for how real men should behave:

For one’s friend, one shall be friend; for him and his friend, but for the foe’s friend, no man shall ever be a friend.⁵

This is a brutal image of the world. Others are either friends or enemies, there are no categories in between. Seeing the world in this way, it becomes crucial that friends stick together and support each other. If one cannot trust one's friends, then one cannot trust anybody. The threat of one's own friends cheating is therefore the worst threat of all, as the only thing one can be sure of is that enemies are enemies. That friends are friends, however, is not always true, and must, accordingly, be demanded again and again, as in the earlier quotation stating that "we must stick together." Joining forces against those who are against them means diminishing personal differences and disagreements between them. This is in line with the way Bauman conceptualizes the differences between the categories friend, enemy and stranger. There is a logical interdependence between the first two categories: "There would be no enemies were there no friends, and there would be no friends if not for the yawning abyss of enmity outside" (Bauman, 1991, p. 53). This point is very significant for right-wing skinheads. One of them once told me that he did not count any of the other skinheads as friends, but in his fanzine, he often refers to the importance of comradeship within the movement. In other words, there are no real friendships between them, and the only way their comradeship can be realized is by joining forces against their enemies. This is also in line with Bauman (1991, p. 54), who points out that enemies are called into being by the pragmatics of struggle.

As a consequence, the most respected skinhead is the one who joins the ongoing combat with their enemies, who defends the others if attacked, and who is constantly aware of possible enemies wanting to split them, spy on them, or attack them. One ideal among right-wing skinheads is the militant who knows how to handle weapons, and who lets his militant actions be guided more by his ideology or strategic considerations than by his emotions. The headless fighter who is constantly getting beaten up because he is incautious is not an admired figure among them. In contrast, they admire those who manoeuvre underground beyond the view of outsiders, hide from the police, or escape when caught. Actions aimed at the whole group should be secretive, such as when a leading skinhead arranges a secret meeting or a trip without the police or the anti-fascists getting to know when and where it will take place. To master various aspects of secret behavior is important. In this way, right-wing skinheads achieve honor by being invisible, by being able to hide.

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Behavior in public – messages to the outside world

Traditionally, men achieve honor through being visible to the gaze of others (Gilmore, 1990). Right-wing skinheads by their very outlook are very visible to the gaze of others. This gaze provides them with a sense of honor, even when it is marked by contempt or fear. Skinheads moving together in a group, walking straight down the middle of the street, are signalling that they “own” it. By behaving like this they are looking the enemy in the eye, confronting him in the street, and standing up to his insults. Using physical force is a way of ensuring that such face-to-face interactions with opponents are resolved honorably. In fact, even to get “beaten up” is in a sense honorable, as skinheads use such events to prove that they can take it like a man.

When the skinheads defended their house in Treschowsstreet against the police and the demonstrating anarchists in 1995, they wore skinhead uniforms, used Norwegian flags, and gave fascist salutes. This backdrop was clearly created in order to communicate certain messages to their outsiders. Their aim was to shock and provoke, and, more generally, to produce a contrast, a frightening image. They managed to be recognized by others, as the press gave them extensive attention. As participants in the underground, they are sure to get negatively defined attention, marked by fear and contempt rather than admiration. Nevertheless, this provides right-wing skinheads with self-confidence and a sense of being part of something important.

The importance of combat

In public situations, combat situations or collective scenes, right-wing skinheads act with self-confidence and pride. By contrast, when gathered in private, with nothing particular happening, just sitting together waiting for the next “peak experience” (Lindholm, 1990), they look bored, lacking in confidence, generally unpleasant. It is combat that provides them with honor – outdoors is the only place where they can prove their manliness. This view of masculinity as being defined by the mastering of the street is a view consciously taken by the ideologists of the underground, as shown in the earlier quotation of the contrast between middle-class and working-class men. In the streets the ideal of the fighting hero can be reconstructed, and all the other established rules (or hegemonic masculinities) (Connell, command of anything when he walks down the street and meets an angry crowd of skinheads. Right-wing skinheads adhere to a lifestyle which

provides them with power comparable even to the real men of power in society, because they know that if they wanted to they would be able to control these people in the reality of the street.

A lifestyle of intimidation

Uniforms and group conformity

To enter the right-wing underground is to take up a lifestyle based on a threatening appearance. Although there are minor differences, the appearance of the group members seems highly uniform to outsiders. External conformity protects the individual participants in the same way that any uniform does, by hiding their individuality, inner feelings and thoughts. By looking alike, they are a group, and can act accordingly. Thus, when attacking others they can rely on the morality of the group, without taking into account their own private moral standards. Being part of the underground means that the barriers against which actions the single person may commit are moved many steps away from what would have been the case prior to participation.

The dress itself has connotations of brutality. Shaven skull, heavy Doc Martens boots, "bomber" jackets, camo jeans, Viking symbols and tattoos; all these elements serve to build up an aggressive version of masculinity. The skinhead style also connotes working classness (Hebdige, 1979). Those participants who dress like skinheads are aware of this. They point out, for example, that Doc Martens boots are not military boots, as often described, but working boots made to last. Some wear studded "killing boots" which make them extra dangerous in fights.

The shaven head, either completely shaven, or with just a couple of millimetres left, also connotes brutality. They use the completely shaven head as a mark of aggression. One leading figure who usually preferred to leave a slight crest of hair on his skull once showed up with his head shaven to the bone. I asked him why he had done it. Looking angry, he just said "as a reaction." The impression he gave was one of much more hate than usual. From what he said, I gathered that to shave the head entirely was a reaction against things in his life at that time, which were hard for him to handle. Right-wing skinheads are often called "boneheads" by their opponents, because they shave their heads more than left-wing skinheads. Shaving the head gives a more brutish look and leaves nothing for an opponent to grab hold of in a fight. Some skinheads associate long hair

with femininity. They tease the few right-wing activists who have long hair, and call them “girls.”⁶

Tattoos are a part of the style meant to communicate masculinity. Merely being tattooed is seen as being tough. As a leading right-wing skinhead explains, the pain which comes with being tattooed marks the barrier one has to cross, reflecting that one is willing to remain loyal to the underground in the future. Belonging to a skinhead group is a conviction which lies in your heart, he said, and which you have to stand for later in life as well. Tattoos are marks of commitment; they cannot be taken off like items of clothing. According to this man, being a “real skinhead” means that “you can’t just wear the boots when you go out with your skinhead friends.” If you are a skinhead, you are a full-time skinhead, and this aspect is assured by the use of tattoos. To have large parts of the body covered with tattoos is also a mark that one has been a member of the underground for a long time. Leading skinheads have most parts of their upper body covered in tattoos. In order to show off the tattoos to the other men, it is usual for them to remove their T-shirts during concerts. The musicians themselves remove their T-shirts. Doing this may be understood as a ritual greeting from man to man, letting the body confirm their commitment through its tattoos, and also through its muscles, serving as a proof of manliness.

The beer culture

Another aspect of the skinhead lifestyle is what the skinhead calls “beer culture.” Meeting comrades at the pub is, in his eyes, an integral part of the working-class lifestyle. When drinking a lot, skinheads become more excited, and late at night noisy quarrels are common. Some skinheads accept the fact that one is more easily provoked when drunk, and may initiate fights more frequently. The ideal, however, is that one is able to drink a lot but still control one’s body. The man who “gets pissed” is not reckoned to be manly by right-wing skinheads, and those who frequently lose control through drunkenness are ridiculed by the others. Drunkenness also often leads to exaggerated sentimentality. For example, one of the leading skinheads, when he is drunk, tells others how much he likes them, and exaggerates the content of his message so much that it borders on the pathetic. This kind of sentimentality is also seen in right-wing males watching Second World War movies with huge parades, as they sit weeping together because of how great it all was.

Some right-wing males have less sense of this kind of drunken

sentimentality, honoring instead the ability to stay sober and disciplined. In their eyes, drunken skinheads are not serious, and might bring harm to the underground by their uncontrolled, raucous street violence. Committing violence without it being noticed is in their eyes more honorable than fighting the enemy eye-to-eye in the street. Some skinheads take the opposite view: they consider fighting bare-fisted facing an opponent to be more honest and just than underground acts committed out of the sight of others.

The lack of empathy – “horny on violence”

Ray (1972) states that Australian neo-Nazis lack the ability to show empathy with – and, moreover, the feeling of pleasure regarding – the pains of others. This tendency is also prevalent among Norwegian right-wing skinheads. Ray considers that this feature is prevalent among most people, and he uses the faces of the audience at boxing matches as proof. However, what defines the fascist, according to Ray, is his acceptance of these sentiments, even taking a pride in them. Similarly, Theweleit (1987) has produced an illuminating report on men in the German storm-troops describing their enormous desire to see blood flowing. Seeing the result of a massacre aroused pleasurable feelings, and the will to act violently may be due to the fact that the violence itself produces desire.

Such sentiments are clearly present among some right-wing skinheads. A female activist once explained a severe violent act committed by two male skinheads as the result of their being “horny on violence.” I have seen skinheads laugh and amuse themselves when seeing people suffer from hunger on television. On the other hand, the skinheads do not dwell on the result of their own violence. There is a code among them that when a victim falls to the ground they must stop kicking him. This is not always the case. Sometimes only one skinhead attacks, but there are also incidents where several others follow the initiator, collectively hitting and kicking one person. Usually, they kick an enemy until he falls, and then run away, giving no consideration to the long- or short-term injuries they have inflicted upon him. The consequences of their violence become diffuse for them.

On the few occasions when they have had to face their victim afterwards, they do not show much empathy. Once when they had beaten up a person from their rival group, the police immediately afterwards caught them and confronted them with the victim, who was to point out which of them had beaten him. Afterwards, a skinhead retold the event.

“He was so badly injured, he couldn’t even point,” he explained. With a grimace, he tried to illustrate how the victim sat there trying to point with his arm, but unable to do so. Apparently, the event did not arouse any feelings of empathy for the pain the man must have felt. On the contrary, he found it amusing.

Revenge and rebellion

However, for the skinheads, the injuries and pain inflicted on their victims even out, as they frequently get beaten up themselves. They define their own violence as revenge or self-defense, depending on the situation. To participate in a gang fight is almost always interpreted as being just and therefore honorable, probably because they are then acting as a group, and on behalf of the group. Revenge might be defined in a very broad sense. When, for example, a politician participates in anti-racist campaigns, this is seen as an initiative on the part of the system directed against right-wing skinheads. Hence, to attack the house of this politician is another version of revenge. Most acts of violence against political opponents seem to be defined as legitimate and honorable among them. However, they also have ideas of what kind of violence they do not approve of. They do not define beating up single persons or “innocents” (people who are not politically involved) as being honorable. However, if this should happen despite the norm, they often reinterpret it afterwards as a sad result of the effects an oppressive system has on its brave fighters:

Egil: Our rebellion is a product of the system. We occasionally attack people on their own, but this is a result of the politics of the system ... Terror is all the violence carried out by the system, which we don’t even notice. That’s terror, the rest is a struggle for liberation.

To be a rebel or a revolutionary who opposes the very system seems to be the most honorable profile, as this quotation might illustrate. In accordance with other kinds of terrorists, right-wing skinheads equate their more severe violence with a struggle for liberation and not as terrorism. In this way they explicitly counteract society’s common definitions of them, and present alternative interpretations. They prefer others to see them as victims of destiny rather than as evil authoritarians. In this way, they can neutralize their violence as a production of the “system” – its class-structures, bad environments and so on. In contrast to common people, they dare to fight the unjust Authorities. Here we see an association between violence and honesty. To live out the hatred means being honest, being

authentic. They do not suppress their aggression against the suppressing structures; in contrast, they live it out. Violence in this sense is a free-floating energy. This is interesting in the light of Reich's (1972) theory of fascism as a blocking of sexual energies. In the self-interpretation of right-wing skinheads, it is the blocking of the aggressive energies of the common people which is pathological. Hence, in their eyes, to live out violent drives is something desirable. This feature is described in several studies of youth violence (Willis, 1977), and is also acknowledged in group psychology (Le Bon, 1896): "When individuals come together in a group, their individual inhibitions fall away and all the cruel, brutal and destructive instincts, which lie dormant ... are stirred up and find free gratification."

The avoidance of femininity

Masculine ideals

It is indeed a brute masculinity that attracts young boys into the right-wing underground. Their masculinity is brutish, as they describe "real men" as those who act rather than those who speak, and those who fight rather than those who move aside. This image of masculinity stands in contrast to their understanding of softness, weakness, or sometimes more explicitly, femininity. A gentle attitude is something skinheads regard with suspicion, whereas force is something they respect. For male skinheads this underground world dominated by masculine ideals is a safe island in the sense that it provides them with self-confidence. One leading activist reports that a trend is for the boys to have few or no contacts with girls before entering the underground. It is the male community that fascinates them and leads them to join it. The accepting attitude of older males, and their willingness to give the young newcomers positions of responsibility, lead newcomers into ecstatic enthusiasm in the first phase of their participation. Several male skinheads have told me that this milieu was the first one in which they felt really welcome. It was here that they developed a sense of importance. In the first phase, it is the feeling of being included by elder, well-known activists which is important to them. Later on, most males try to establish their own agendas within the underground, and in more or less overt ways oppose the dominance of the eldest activists. In this latter phase, they are usually more self-confident, making contact with the girls participating in the underground and being more prepared to engage romantically with them.

Relations to women

In some respects, then, these male skinheads seem to fit the picture Theweleit (1987) draws of fascist men who participated in the free-corps in Germany prior to the Second World War. According to Theweleit, these freebooters feared women and accordingly idealized the male community based to a great extent on brutality. One conclusion we can draw from Theweleit's extensive analysis, is that when men lack the ability to relate to women in an equal way, the way they dare experience intimacy is more one-sidedly brutal. Therefore, the way the men relate to women is an important measure of their degree of brutality.

In the Norwegian right-wing underground, some male skinheads espouse the view that women ought not to participate in the underground, because they destroy the combat by their sensitivity. At events such as concerts and confrontations, some male skinheads tend to exclude their partners. Often, women remain in the background area at such events, so that the area in front of the stage or the front-line during attacks is occupied solely by males. Norwegian male activists change between total acceptance of the women, saying they are willing to include them in all actions, even saying that some of them are more serious and reliable than many of the men, *and* dividing women uncritically into the Madonna/whore icon. They divide "their own girls" into those who are "straight," and thus suitable as love partners and fellow-combatants, and those who are "mattresses" and thus only suitable as sexual objects and as tagalongs. Most of the leading males have established love relationships. In the original English skinhead subculture, according to Clarke (1976), establishing a love relationship usually meant breaking ties with the male-dominated skinhead community. Girls therefore could only function as tagalongs, the males treating them with extreme chauvinism. In some regards, then, the Norwegian male right-wing skinheads are more pro-women than the original skinheads described by Theweleit. They do not operate with as strict a distinction between the all-pure, almost asexual nurse-sister, and the dangerous sexuality ascribed to their hate object, the proletarian woman, who is not even worthy of serving as a "mattress." They do not demand that their partners should be all-pure idealized objects staying out of the battle. In this regard, they are more similar to the communist men described by Theweleit, in that they can become fellow-combatants by behaving in a masculine manner. The men accept women as long as they are able to live up to the ideals of staying calm, controlling their feelings and being able to deal with weapons.

The combative woman

In the anthropological literature, honor is usually described in terms of competition between dominant men and the passive subordination of women (Lindisfarne, 1994). Typically, women are not felt to be capable of protecting their own honor. Consequently, men must protect women's honor. A common trend is that women's honor is defined solely in terms of sexuality (as a contrast to purity). There are indications that female virginity is important in the Norwegian underground, as both male and female activists tend to divide their fellow females into either straight or mattress. A woman activist has to be straight in order to be taken seriously. There have been occasions when a male skinhead has knocked another one down for kissing his girlfriend. Usually it is not the girlfriend who has offended her partner, but rather the other male. In other words, honor can be achieved only between men.

However, as Lindisfarne argues, the picture is often much more complex than this, and usually several roles are available for both men and women. Right-wing subcultures are usually interpreted as extreme areas in regard to these features. Yet, it is not the passive, pure, subordinate woman who is pictured in Norwegian right-wing fanzines, but rather the female fellow-combatant who acts aggressively. The boys idealize various types of combative women (Fangen, 1997). The women themselves idealize the image of the combative woman, and accept the male, militant values of the underground. In other words, they do not provide a feminine impact that would diminish the underground's brutal potential. These women also want to achieve power through militancy, and undergo, for example, weapons training along with the men (Fangen, 1997). Therefore, the women also construct the picture of a community dominated by aggressive masculine ideals. Nevertheless, they also contribute with a distinctive feminine impact, by defining certain "women's issues" as being important to them, such as fighting prostitution, abortion and pornography, and "securing the future for our children and for girls in the movement" (*ibid.*).

The link between homosexuality and neo-Nazism

The right-wing women support militant practices, but so far have taken part "in the front-line" only to a minor extent. Therefore the movement does not differ much traditional view that "combat and military experience separate men from women while binding men to men" (Morgan, 1994, p. 166). When talking about community and comradeship, these right-wing men

most often think in terms of male community and male comradeship. The way they conceptualize their heroes is in many ways an idealization and romanticization of maleness, and it is the male hero they pay homage to. The way these men behave at concerts, standing tightly together, sometimes even holding their arms around each other, pulling off their T-shirts, standing their with naked upper body, has lead outsiders to question whether the community of these young men is based on homosexual desires. Second World War Nazism has been interpreted by several authors in this way (Reich, 1972; Mosse, 1985; Theweleit, 1987; Nissen, 1946; Becker, 1946). The issue of the existence of a congruence between neo-Nazism and homosexuality has been made plausible because some male leaders of neo-Nazi groups, like Michael Kühnen, have been homosexuals. In Norway, one of the leading figures of the 1980s neo-Nazi movement was a bisexual. The neo-Nazi leader Michael Kühnen (who died from AIDS) openly argued that homosexuals were especially useful for the movement, because they did not quit as a result of developing a relationship with a woman (Husbands, 1993).

Aware of the plausibility of such a view about their community, the link between homosexuality and Nazism was one of the first issues that right-wing skinheads brought up and tried to explain to me when I started my fieldwork in August 1993. Their response was that the issue was relevant, and that in the Norwegian underground too there had been homosexual participants. Some of the skinheads were still befriended by them, but in another setting they could just as easily beat up a homosexual. Several of the males emphasized that "I have no such tendencies" and "I like girls." When I asked if they had something against homosexuals, they either said that "no, most of the guys in this milieu are tolerant" or that "we like neither gays nor lesbians. Homosexuality is against the Law of Nature." They recited some cruel jokes about homosexuals, and some of their fanzines include satire on presumably homosexual participants of the underground.

Using homosexuality as a way to weaken the Other is a mode well-known in all hypermasculine communities like outlaw motorbike-clubs (Bay, 1989), and was also an integral part of Nazi ideology and practice. When used in this way, the homosexual has the quality of being a stranger in the sense Bauman (1991, p. 55) gives this term. You cannot know whether or not your friend is homosexual, and accordingly, you do not know whether or not your enemy is a homosexual. It is exactly the indeterminant aspect of homosexuality that makes it threatening to a community ruled by the friend/enemy dichotomy.

Teasing as confirmation and intimidation of masculinity

The association with homosexuality is threatening to the right-wing skinhead community because it weakens the connotation between masculinity and strength.⁷ Male skinheads associate homosexuality with femininity, which again is associated with weakness and deviance. Being a fag is understood as being the opposite of a real male. Male skinheads call another man “fag” to dishonor him.⁸ Once a skinhead who was well acquainted with the underground, but who did not play a leading role within it, was teased by a younger activist who had just entered the group. The younger man said to the other “You look like you enjoy being fucked in the ass.” The other one replied “Yes, I do, but I enjoy being taken in the front even more.” “But you,” he added, “you look like a girl, with that long hair!” “No, it’s not girlish to have long hair,” replied the younger man. “Oh yes it is,” added one of the younger man’s own friends. The younger man became irritated and launched a long tirade of insults against the older skinhead, calling him fag in all sorts of ways. The older skinhead did not deign to respond. He just left the table and began playing billiards. He was the winner anyway, as the younger man’s friends had supported him, so there was no need to continue the quarrel.

In contests such as this, one could say that the men sexualize each other. This kind of “kidding” is interpreted by Frøberg (forthcoming) as relation-work between men. It might also be interpreted as an honor game (Bay, 1989).

The honors and dishonors of the brotherhood*External and internal threats*

The community among right-wing skinheads becomes a tense, aggressive unit against the outer world. The worst threat to this unity is not attacks from the outside – on the contrary, these attacks are necessary if the solidarity among skinheads is to remain strong. The real threat is that this community consisting of many aggressive, bitter and frustrated men (this description of them was used by a leading skinhead) will split up as a result of internal strife. A split in their community is far more threatening than being attacked by rival groups from the outside.

This is also the reason why “traitors” are a continuous threat to their community. Several times leading skinheads have been accused of serving as informants for the police. Usually they try to reaffirm their innocence,

but there are also incidents of some having this reputation for years without trying to prove otherwise. Such men, however, generally tend to loosen their bonds with the core of the underground in order to escape the pressure upon them.

Splits in the community occur, however, not just in such cases as police co-operation. Internal strife is frequent, often due to competition for status and respect, or by differing opinions on strategy. Although comradeship is the most worshipped ideal among them, the intimate comradeship based on mutual trust is more the exception than the rule. On the one hand, male skinheads say that the comradeship is the most attractive feature of the underground, and that they have never felt as accepted anywhere else as they have here. On the other hand, they say that the worst thing about the underground is the quarrels and strife.

Emotional tensions

Directing aggressive feelings outwards is necessary if the antagonism which always lurks beneath the surface of the skinhead community is to be suppressed. Their community is not based on bonds that have grown naturally from a base of mutual sympathy and friendship. Rather, many of the men have entered this underground on their own initiative, without any prior knowledge of those associated with it. They do not have much in common, despite their mutual situation of being attached to an underground which makes people outside their community despise them, attack them, or spy on them. Partly because of pressure from the outside world, and partly because of their community being formed on grounds other than friendship, there is a lot of tension between them, and the ideals of comradeship are hard to realize. They often transform their frustration and suspicion of the outside world into frustration and distrust toward other skinheads. These tensions in turn sometimes lead to physical or verbal feuding between the men. They name-call each other in negative terms, or shout at each other. During the course of a single evening, laughing comrades often turn into silent strangers.

The way skinheads express comradeship often serves to show superiority of status. They commend each other by including one another in important events, praising each other in front of others, or by buying each other beer. However, as Bay (1989) points out, buying somebody a beer underlines the subordination of the recipient of the beer. The man who receives the beer is not supposed to reciprocate the action, and that would amount to challenging the status of the other. For example, a younger self-

confident skinhead once borrowed money from one of the leading skinheads. When this older and more experienced skinhead later asked for his money back, the younger one merely bought him a beer, turning his back on him as if there were nothing more to discuss. Although the beer was worth only a fourth of the amount he owed, by acting in this manner he clearly opposed the leading status of the other man.

Comradeship and subordination

This episode is understandable in light of the fact that an experienced skinhead might often ask others to buy him a beer. The alacrity with which the other does or does not do so reflects the degree to which the other skinhead accepts the experienced one as a person rightfully deserving of respect. Consequently, very young and inexperienced skinheads would feel honored by being asked to buy the older skinhead a beer. By contrast, more experienced skinheads would question the authority of the elder, answering his question with a laugh, or by ignoring it, and turning their backs on him, or by later demanding that he return the gesture.

Physical expressions of comradeship might also carry symbolic messages of subordination; for example, when one skinhead pushes another skinhead's head or nudges his shoulder. Skinheads who have more highly placed positions of leadership, despite the norm of equality, can be more physical than the others. One of the leading skinheads becomes quite intimate when he is drunk. He kisses and hugs the other men, puts his arm around them, or pulls their hoods over their heads. The others just shake their heads, look elsewhere, push him away gently, or look a bit sheepish when he puts his arm around them. The reactions of the others reflect the fact that these friendly approaches of his also contain an element of subordination. He confirms that he is the initiator, the one to make contact, the father figure, and his actions show them that they are of lower status. A younger skinhead with less status would not have approached the others in such a direct fashion. It is the leading skinhead who can transgress the boundaries. These actions of the leading figure might be seen as status rituals in the sense Goffman (1972) gives the term, the leading figure confirming through his behaviour that the others must defer to his status. The others more or less passively accept his conduct. By not accepting it too explicitly, they express some of the resentment or ambivalence with which they regard his authority.

The skinhead dance

Another situation that reveals closeness, and at the same time subordination, is the skinhead dance. The dance is a blend of “stomping” (as the dance also is named) and “banging,” as the men stamp the ground and bang their heads against each other. The dance looks like a fight, and can become very rough. It may be considered a way of being close without showing tender feelings. In this way, togetherness and intimacy can be simultaneously linked to aggression and masculinity. This kind of male interaction is a safe island for them, the rough way of expressing intimacy being easier to handle than other more gentle forms. Often a participant is wounded if he stumbles and falls and is stamped on by the feet of the other men.

This was the case when one of the younger skinheads linking arms with his friend, a leading skinhead, dragged him into the chaotic mob. The man being dragged stumbled and fell with the pressure, and was trampled on. Finally, someone managed to pull him out, but without his bag. Hunting everywhere for it, I later told him that he had lost it when he was drawn into the mass. This tale amazed him. He seemed proud that his friend had pushed him into the crowd, although he had been badly injured by the episode. This again is a case of a friend acting in a physical manner, but in a way which also pushes the other one down. Even though this skinhead was the one who was pushed down, he was happy about it. He accepted the injury because the event served to build up his masculinity. It was a manly way of being physical, a way that marked inclusion, and at the same time an expression of power.

This kind of brutal intimacy serves as an award, letting the other skinhead prove he can take the pain associated with the insult without any sign of weakness. Instead he is proud because he can take it with a smile. Back (1994) shows that it is expected that the person who is exposed to so-called wind-up rituals will take part in the laughter afterwards. In another situation he will be the one doing the winding up. The function of these rituals is to produce a common identity and to contest and modify the friendship. By not being offended by a wind-up, a skinhead implicitly shows that the other's play with him does not threaten the deference shown to him.

On other occasions younger skinheads might question the authority of an older skinhead more explicitly. A young skinhead once told an older one that “no one in this milieu respects you.” The older skinhead promptly wanted to knock the younger one to the ground, replying, “I’ll whip you

with a chain.” Such threats of violence between skinheads are not usually followed up in practice. Their function is to show in certain terms that the other should not dare to push the boundaries of authority any further.

These two examples also illuminate the ambivalence with which younger skinheads view the authority of their more experienced elders. For the most part, they have to subordinate themselves to the authority of the most experienced, but to even out the resentment this produces, on other occasions they try to oppose their authority. As Lindholm (1990) puts it, parricide seethes beneath the surface of abjection.

A collective response to the ambivalences of modernity

The right-wing skinhead subculture provides an atmosphere which is attractive to young boys who long for acceptance and the feelings of honor, power and excitement. In this context, violence and intimidation are made possible as a distinct part of a lifestyle constituted by a stylized version of masculinity. Violence becomes a way of claiming and asserting masculinity. Even though the kind of masculinity constructed among right-wing skinheads resembles the hegemonic masculinity portrayed in Hollywood movies and in the propaganda of the military and war, the expression of such masculinities among young working-class men is a manifestation of what Connell calls the assertion of protest masculinity. Protest masculinity is a response to the feeling of powerlessness; it is an exaggeration of masculine conventions. This protest is a collective practice, and not a quality within the individual person. As aptly put by Connell (1995, p. 111), through interaction within this milieu, young men put together a tense freaky facade, making a claim to power where there are no real resources for it. “There is a lot concern with face, a lot of work put into keeping a front.” Even though there are individual variations in how this is done, it is the group which is the bearer of masculinity. Without the group, many of these men would be at a loss (Connell, 1995, p. 107).

Typically, those who enter this environment have little to lose by entering it. They have problems in achieving the same feeling of honor by their performances in other more conventional areas. The right-wing community provides them with the warmth of the brotherhood, which also gives them the sense of being part of something of great importance, something that extends their own vulnerable selves. In so doing, this subculture breaks with the individualization trend described by Ziehe. It also breaks with the self-actualization trend described by Giddens as the

typical quality of today's identity projects. Rather, one can see these young men's version of masculinity as a collective response to the feeling of ontological insecurity, as described by Giddens. The group makes these men feel omnipotent; left alone, they feel vulnerable, and worth nothing. They feel secure within the group, which provides them with a collective protective cocoon, and with a collective defense against the threats of the outside world. The war between their own group and its opponents gives their fears a concrete object. Without this, a more generalized anxiety attached to the ambivalence of modern everyday life, would be more complex to handle. By constructing a rigid division of us and them, the world becomes ordered and easily defined. And their own role is transformed from being an individual nobody to being a hero among comrades.

However, the warm brotherhood has its limits. The feeling of distrust in relation to the outside world with all its possible enemies leads to a feeling of distrust between the skinheads as well. Many of them are better in dealing with power than in dealing with intimacy, hence there is only a thin layer between comradeship and intimidation. Their uniforms, their lifestyle, and the way they relate to each other are factors serving to create an atmosphere that makes violence more a regularity than a disruption. To be attacked or to attack are the only possible occasions which provide them with a sense of in-group solidarity, and a feeling of being honorable.

Notes

1. In a previous essay (Fangen, 1997), I asked what role and impact girls in the right-wing underground had. The role of the girls is important, for they are a minority in an underground dominated by ideals traditionally understood as masculine. However, this does not mean that the role and impact of boys in the underground is unambiguous.
2. Ragnarok is a militant national socialist fanzine. In 1996 it was replaced by Einherjer.
3. This image might hold some truth. However, as historian Gunnes (1993, p.178) describes it, another side to the Viking male contests for prestige was their "undimensioned exaggerations, a childish desire to impress, and to hold one's own." This description might even hold for today's right-wing activists.
4. Fanzines are journals edited by an individual or a group. They comprise reviews, editorials and interviews produced on a small scale and as cheaply as possible (Hebdige, 1979, p. 111).
5. Hávamál, Verse 43, quoted in Bootboys /Ragnar'k, 12 (2) (1992).
6. In other words, they do not try to copy the Viking man in their appearance.

The connotation between hair and gender was probably the opposite among Vikings, as some of the best known and legendary Vikings had long hair, and on one occasion even hair that continued to grow after the man had died. Harald Hårfagre (Harold with the fair hair), presumably one of the bravest and most masculine of Vikings, letting his hair grow until he had conquered the whole kingdom, personifies this view.

7. Fags might be experienced as competitors and intruders in a male community like the right-wing underground. According to Nissen's (1961) analysis of such features male communities are marked by an outwardly directed tendency to combat. In a male community based on homosexual sentiments, this competitive attitude might be directed inwards as jealousy between the men.
8. Feminine and ethnic attributes may function to lower another man's status, to provoke, or tease him. This means that femininity, homosexuality and being from an ethnic minority are all qualities which the activists consider negations of real masculinity, defined in terms of the white, race-conscious front-soldier.

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