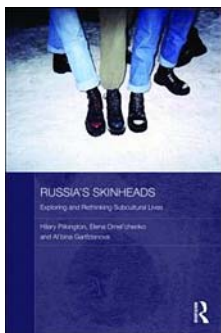


BOOK REVIEW

SUBSTANCE OF A RUSSIAN SKINHEAD



Pilkington, Hilary & Omel'chenko, Elena & Garifzianova, Albina B. (eds.) 2010. *Russia's Skinheads. Exploring and re-thinking subcultural lives*. London, New York: Routledge.

Skinheads are usually viewed as something of an urban nightmare, young, violent street thugs who make everybody else's life a misery. Skinhead culture first appeared in the United Kingdom in the late 1960s as an off-shoot from the preceding mod culture and was an expression of working class teenagers adopting a black, especially Jamaican culture. Skinheads made a comeback in the 1970s and in the 1980s, the subculture spread internationally and exists today in cities from Russia to South

America (Marshall 1993; Farin 2001). Despite the popular image, skinhead subculture is divided into a large variety of different subgroups defined by music, style, and political views.

The first academic publication to discuss skinhead culture was written by Michael Brake (1974). It was followed by other papers on British skinhead subculture in the spirit of the Birmingham school i.e. as a working class youth culture focused on its class, territory and community (i.e. Clarke 1976; Hebdidge 1979; Willis *et al.* 1990). Interestingly, the complexity of the skinhead culture in music, style and politics has been discussed more thoroughly in German language publications (Farin 2001; El-Nawab 2001). However, there is only few works that give the reader the feeling of what it means to be a skinhead. Groundbreaking is the monograph by David Moore (1994) who has studied Australian skinheads in the 1990s. Besides giving us a picture of how English identity is articulated through adopting skinhead subculture as a symbol of Britishness, he gives the reader a glimpse into the lives of these young men and their everyday practices.

Russia's Skinheads promises to "turn skinheads inside out" (p. 1) and shows that the style and ideology is only a surface to cover a complexity of race, politics, social relations, nationalism, economic prospects etc. in the lives of young people from the North Russian mining town of Vorkuta. The co-authors show that skinheads are a "product of their environment" as the popular Russian saying states and that the style defines the *nature* of the group but not the *substance* (p. 12). Therefore the focus of the book is less on music or outfits but on social networks or practices. The first part of the book is focused on the environment of the skinheads and its impact on youth. Pilkington discusses in Chapter 2 the meaning of living in an isolated town arguing that ethnographic research must be engaged with time and space "that extends our understanding of their role" (p. 25). Similar to Nayak's real Geordies who grew up with "coal in their bones" (Cohen 1993 in Nayak 2003: 69), young men from Vorkuta are influenced by the town's heroic history as an important coal mining centre and now lost in the

degradation, poverty and lack of life perspectives of a post-socialist setting. The feeling of depression is increased by the following chapter that shows skinheads as “lost kids” from broken families with “absent fathers and unforgiven mothers”. Fortunately this does not mean following the path of 1990s German scholars who interpreted a youth’s violent behaviour with a lack of social skills growing up in broken families (e.g. Bohnsack 1997). The book shows that most skinheads had very warm feelings towards their parents and because of that were affected in their xenophobic views. Another source of accumulating ideology was talking with friends and colleagues. In this book it is demonstrated that the “skinhead’s movement of action” cannot exist without talking. These ideologies (i.e. local experience p.59) are transferred to the street and tied to the group which has become a new microcosm for skinheads.

Discussing Russia’s skinheads one cannot avoid the topic they are notorious for: violence. When theorising about violence, several scholars have demonstrated its connection to ideology, masculinity and rituals (e.g. Blok 2001; Gill 2007; Harrison 1993). Fighting is an important part of skinhead identity (cf. Moore 1994: 66), it is not purely xenophobic but a ritual demonstration of presence in the cityscape and a way of articulating social relations with other groups like punks or *gopniki* (proletarian aggressive Russian youth, see Habeck & Ventsel 2009). Group activities are built on a common perception of trust, masculinity and body, drawn from mining town social norms. Presentation of the hard body to the outside and establishing “homosocial intimacy” within the group form together the skinhead identity. Authors demonstrate how changes in environment initiate shifts in “performative” body politics: alongside the growth of general hostility toward skinheads the group shifts to inward activities like body decoration, training and hanging out together. Body is an initial instrument for creating male bonding and solidarity, but also has an ideologically driven purpose: a “healthy and beautiful body” is needed by “warriors” on the streets as much as for earning money (p. 171–177). Discussion around the skinhead body ideology shows its complexity and controversy of images and realities of hegemonic masculinity, manoeuvring between a homosocial solidarity of “real” men and homophobia.

The last part is dedicated to reflections of the research where co-authors show their own complicated feelings when conducting research on a group with an unacceptable ideology but having established an emotional relationship with the lads. This discussion is very welcome because such ethical emotion driven issues are not very often discussed in the research of racist or xenophobic groups.

This book shows that “real skins are less coherent than the stereotype” (Hebdidge 1982: 33) and is a fascinating case study that addresses several theoretical and ethical questions. The book should be interesting not only for scholars who are strictly focused on youth subculture. Discussions around race, ethnicity and gender make this work recommended reading for readers of social science and cultural studies.

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