‘Chaos in France’: Fieldnotes from the French punk experience

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Abstract
While punk and skinhead experiences in the English-speaking world have been widely documented, the same cannot be said for the French space where these subcultures nonetheless took root from the end of the 1970s onwards. This article paints the portraits of punks and skinheads who each embody, in their own way, a certain sense of ‘chaos in France’. In doing so, it opens up a research avenue that not only fills a gap in existing studies but also suggests a new way of examining the signification of subcultural resistance to dominant normativities. The article draws on observation and interviews, as well as auto-ethnographic material and critical analysis of text, music and film archives. This produces a variety of perspectives, which bring out subcultural dynamics in an analysis that is as closely focused as possible on the lives of those who embodied these dynamics to the bitter end, in all the contradictions of rebellion.

Keywords
films, France, lifestyles, music, punk experience, subcultural resistance

At the end of the 1970s, a number of British subcultures emerged in France among marginal youths, some of whom identified with punk and skinhead styles. These were the styles that the founding researchers of Cultural Studies in Britain interpreted as ritualised forms of resistance to the cultural domination of the working class by the market logic of mass consumerism. Around the ‘Fountain of the Innocent’ in Paris, and soon in all the cities in France, various groups embodied these lifestyles that they forged on the streets. They made these streets into a heroic figure in a public protest against the codes of ‘straight’ society. An increasing body of archival fragments on the subject is now available online (photographs, films, websites) and in certain testimonial books (e.g. Marsault and Muller, 1990; Rudeboy, 2007; Quintana, 2012). However, unlike the British case, a study of the rise and signification of these oppositional subcultures in France remains to

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be done. This article aims to contribute to this by retracing certain fragments of the experiences of punks and skinheads whose lifestyles illustrate a certain sense of ‘chaos in France’ (to coin the title of a two-volume compilation released in 1983 and 1984, presenting some musical expressions of this genre*).²

**The street as heroin(e): Subcultural dynamics and their analyses**

This study examines these subcultural dynamics from a stance as closely focused as possible on the everyday lives of the people that embody them. In this sense, it is a critical extension of the research begun by the members of the University of Birmingham’s Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS).
Subcultural conflict and the semiological tradition of cultural studies

After the turn of the 1970s, researchers at the CCCS began semiological work focusing on the lifestyles and appearance displayed by British working-class youth breaking with the expectations and moral codes conveyed by the ‘dominant ideology’ of the bourgeois classes. ‘Teddy boys’, ‘motor-bike boys’, ‘mods’, ‘rockers’, ‘skinheads’, ‘punks’, ‘rastas’ and ‘hippies’ became the focus of these researchers’ attention, most of whom had also experienced life within these groups (for seminal works in this scholarly vein, see, for example, Hall and Jefferson, 2004 [1975]; Hebdige, 2003 [1979]; Willis, 1978). They therefore had inside knowledge of how the groups saw the world and how they displayed that vision through their taste in clothes and music, which they brandished as symbolic flags of resistance against the formatting of the dominant classes. The signs conveyed by these British working-class youth subcultures became the subject of analysis combining, on one hand, semiology inspired by literary criticism and, on the other, a Gramscian conception of the class struggle – a struggle in which the culture and lifestyles of subaltern groups are a vector for opposition to the values and habits of the holders of hegemony. However, the descriptions they provided of this ‘subcultural conflict’ (Cohen, 1997 [1972]) rarely gave in to the temptation of revolutionary romanticism. Instead, they revealed how its resistance was almost always drained of its revolutionary content and then taken over by dominant culture, which converted it into merchandise and translated its codes into the language of ‘fashion’.

The CCCS researchers approached these subcultures as systems of signs whose coherence required decoding, but they also described them in ‘naturalist’ terms. The idea was to reproduce the points of view of the people who belonged to these worlds, observed in their ‘natural attitudes’. Directly inspired by both the sociology of the Chicago School and symbolic interactionism, this desire to describe the ordinary and the everyday made it possible to see how the actors concerned viewed the meaning of their subcultural engagement. This therefore required participant observation, keeping the researchers in direct contact with the flow of experiences in question. That being said, despite this avowed ethnographic stance, the emblematic publications of the Birmingham researchers (in addition to the references cited above, see Gelder and Thornton, 1997: 83–142) were fairly sparing in their accounts of actual experience. Rather than focusing on details grounded in everyday life, the authors seemed to prefer a more distanced analysis: they painted archetypal portraits of actors from these different subcultures and provided details about their systems of signs or objects – often polarised according to the musical styles, identities and dress codes associated with them. This descriptive bias resulted in a somewhat perverse effect, insofar as subcultural analysis became focused on this dimension of music scenes to the detriment of looking at what being a mod, a punk or a skinhead might actually mean in terms of everyday interactions. As for the researchers’ own engagement in these worlds, which could have provided an account of this, it remains strangely absent from their writing, which is empty of any of the real faces and voices encountered in the field. The same criticism can be levied against the proponents of post-subcultural studies who questioned the legacy of the CCCS at the turn of the 21st century but did not detach themselves from the focus on musical scenes. Their analyses of the latter have mainly tended to create archetypal portraits, illustrated by a few ethnographic sketches (e.g. Muggleton, 2005; Muggleton and Weinzierl, 2003).
From semiology to phenomenology: Re-embodying research

While I acknowledge the importance of the work done by these different generations of subcultural analysts, in this article, I would nonetheless like to suggest a shift in paradigm. The intention is to produce ‘re-embodied’ research by presenting different figures that are more than just archetypal portraits of the skinhead, punk or other subcultural character subsuming the different individualities composing them. On the contrary, in this article, these individualities are brought to the fore: the analysis is filled with portraits of men and women, whose profiles are sketched out so as to reveal not subcultural styles – that is, systems of signs or objects – but rather lived experiences of how these styles are used and passed on. My work replaces the semiological paradigm that has characterised subcultural analysis up until now with a phenomenological paradigm. The latter is rooted in the descriptions of actors engaged in life-worlds at the margins of established society. In order to take this approach, I use the phenomenological method of ‘varying perspectives’ on the same kind of experience. This method allows an eidos to be identified – that is, a set of essential or key characteristics that lie at the foundation of a phenomenon such as, in this case, subcultural engagement and its everyday experience. Here, varying perspectives in this way consists in painting different portraits of French punks and skinheads, from different viewpoints and drawing on different sources in order to gain access to their subcultural experiences. My analysis uses material taken from texts, music and film, as well as from my own experience of these subcultures in the 1990s and 2000s. That personal experience has given rise to a longitudinal ethnographic inquiry, and I have been collating data in that context for more than 10 years – the present analysis draws on that material. In addition to accounts of observation and autoethnographic notes, I also use 20 biographical interviews conducted with the punks and skinheads whom I frequented over those years. The extremely varied material that I use in my research follows on from the multimodal investigations conducted by the CCCS researchers, whose texts cited above combine ethnographic data with critical perspectives on music, text and film. The difference in my approach resides, instead, in the kind of account I give of these subcultural dynamics: instead of the depersonalised stance taken by the Birmingham tradition, in this text these dynamics are embodied. Under the aegis of a phenomenological paradigm, I show how subcultures are appropriated, experienced and signified by their actors.

In the space of an article, I can only reproduce fragments of the different materials composing this research. In choosing these fragments, I was guided by one of the main results that emerged from this analysis of subcultural engagement. As I retraced the trajectories of different punks and skinheads who represent the history of these subcultures in France – some through archival documents, others directly encountered in my ethnographic inquiry – I noticed that most of them had made the street into a key figure, a heroine if you will, in a revolt staged in the city and its public spaces. Claiming to belong to the streets also meant claiming an authentic lifestyle making a radical break with the codes of ‘straight society’. On a very practical level, this meant living outside – that is, in squats – never accepting any salaried work that wasn’t temporary and meeting the majority of their needs by theft or drug dealing. ‘Ma maison est la rue’ (the street is my home) was a much-used expression among the punks and skinheads I lived with – an
expression that indicated how much value they gave to this space, free from social constraints. They had made the street into the heroine of their stories because it gave them a refuge as well as an authentic label. ‘Être de la rue’ (being from the streets) meant standing apart from other punks, more lukewarm in their engagement, nothing more than fans of unbridled rock music, who simply donned the subcultural style and appearance – in their clothing and hairstyles – without actually fully identifying with that lifestyle and its more radical codes. The street, along with the things they experienced there and the charisma they built up there, became a sort of yardstick against which to measure the difference between ‘real’ punks and simple ‘pretenders’ (on this subject, see Fox, 1987; Hebdige, 2003 [1979]: 122). One night, during a concert in a city in North East France, a local punk rock band was playing. Rudy, one of my friends who had been living on the streets for over 10 years, launched into a vilifying attack against the guitarist and singer in the group, whom he saw as a sort of puppet giving an exaggerated performance of revolt:

Your only rebellion is showing off your Mohican [i.e. the haircut worn by certain punks] before going off to work. You don’t live on the street, you don’t know the street. You’re just a little poodle: the lap dog of the bourgeois, who makes a bit of noise with his guitar when he’s allowed. You’re nothing more than an apartment punk. (Fieldnotes from 24 November 2000)

Like Rudy, a lot of the other punks I knew on the street made the latter into a space for expressing their revolt and a heroic figure in their narratives of that revolt. However, they also encountered heroin on those streets, the drug and addictive substance that they sold and then consumed over the years and that exhausted them as much as it exhausted their desire for rebellion. The street was both heroine and heroin for them, and this is more than a simple play on words. In the experiences of these punks and skinheads, whose life paths I have analysed, the street had this double meaning. On one hand, it represented a heroine in their life stories – it was the space that rescued them and allowed them to break free from the codes of ‘straight’ society – but, on the other hand, it also represented the heroin they took over and over again, fuelling their addiction – it was the place where they experimented with the drug and learned to need it. Paradoxically, therefore, the street represents both a heroine and heroin in their stories. It represents the space in which they claim freedom and the drug to which they become enslaved. This emerged as a key feature of the subcultural resistance I observed.6

In this sense, my study is somewhat removed from the youthful engagement that is usually the focus of subcultural analysts. These forms of resistance involve life courses and therefore some measure of ageing on the margins. They also raise the question of the limitations of symbolic opposition to dominant society. Contrary to what the Birmingham researchers believed, it seems to me that these limitations do not only lie in the way mainstream culture absorbs the rebellious substance of these subcultures, but they are also inherent in the subcultural engagement itself.

This article documents the extreme sides of this engagement and shows its paradoxes: on one hand, there is open rebellion, through the celebration of everything that ‘straight’ society considers deviant; on the other, often, the very components of that deviance – for example, taking and selling drugs – gradually wear down any revolt. This
is the main issue addressed by this article, which offers a variety of perspectives on subcultural engagement. However, these are not considered from the point of view of the study of addiction or the analysis of deviance. Instead, emphasis is placed on providing portraits of ‘Chaos in France’, through existential fragments showing how being a punk or a skinhead was actually experienced by individuals who embodied these subcultural dynamics, along with all their internal contradictions. And yet they do not ‘represent’ these dynamics in the way an archetypal portrait would, in the traditional
The clan effect: Stepping into the margins and learning their subcultures

I was twelve when I got tattooed and thirteen when I became smooth [shaved my head], to stand out, you know … And there’s the clan effect, the pack effect. At the time, you don’t really get that. Ten, fifteen years later, you say to yourself it’s really simple: you’re on your own, so you’ve got to find some mates. And your mates have got to look at least a bit like you, so you fit yourself into a group, whether its punks, skinheads, whatever …

Rude boys

Yvan died in 2002, a few months after having spoken the words above, which I recorded during a series of biographical interviews. I had met him for the first time in 1992. We were both 18 years at the time. He had the usual features of a skinhead – shaved head, Paraboots, head held high. In 1992, Yvan and his clan would walk the streets, moving from flats to squats. He and I were keen on legendary topography, places where – beneath the stereotypes and prejudice – ‘maps of meaning’ (Hall and Jefferson, 2004 [1975]: 10) appeared, traced by subcultures invented by previous generations of youth – for example, the late 1960s British gangs, where white skinheads and young Jamaican ruffians were united in a friendship borne from a shared experience of difficult social conditions. This past, deformed by time and our understanding of it, seemed to waft across the Channel and form an edifying impression of forgotten street stories, woven by idle youths with shaved heads shaking off boredom and unemployment with beer and reggae (on this subject, see Marshall, 1994 [1991]).

Long before the skinhead movement was hijacked and besmeared by neo-Nazis, it originated in the West Indian neighbourhoods of London, where this subcultural style was forged through contact with the roughest young migrants from across the Atlantic. These ‘rude boys’ drew their aesthetics from the streets of Kingston, where the hard kids from the ghetto favoured shaved heads and wore impeccable polo necks, sometimes with braces and pork pie hats (White, 1967: 41–42). This style, along with their favourite music (early reggae), rapidly had a strong influence on their White counterparts, soon to be renamed ‘skinheads’.7 A certain number of West Indian and Anglo-Jamaican artists, such as Laurel Aitken*, Derrick Morgan* and Symarip*, translated these encounters into the syncopated beats of what was called ‘skinhead reggae’ at the time. Mixed with the influence of the soul music being recorded in the United States by big label stars (Motown in Detroit, Stax in Memphis) as well as less-known artists such as Edwin Starr* and James Carr*, this genre was the black and white soundtrack to a hybrid working-class subculture.8 The drift towards racism and xenophobia was still marginal in the early 1970s and only occurred 10 years later in response to the National Front’s incessant calls to the youth in English working-class neighbourhoods. Several scenes from the film Rude Boy (1980)*, a documentary fiction based on the 1978 tour of punk band ‘The Clash’, show the character Ray Gange, an anti-hero of the London marginal scene, struggling with the spectre of xenophobic and racist radicalisation. A follower of his favourite
group, for which he worked occasionally as a roadie, this disillusioned alcoholic clung on desperately to what he thought was his clan and the part of his youth that still afforded him some dignity. Viewed from afar (albeit selectively, to forget temporarily about the negative sides – addiction, violence and a certain sense of abandonment), this urban legend of rude boys, skinheads and the other punks that extended it, was the golden age of the disenchanted to some extent. It was a sudden stylistic burst of the declining working classes and provided one of the best subjects for the early work in Cultural Studies discussed at the beginning of this article. Sometimes it seemed as if the whole thing could be summed up in a single slogan: ‘pas plus cons, pas meilleurs, mais différents et unis au sein d’une même partie de la jeunesse’ [no more stupid, no better, just different
and united within the same part of youth], words sung in France by Tai-Luc, the wordsmith of the band La Souris Déglinguée* [The Wrecked Mouse], also known by its initials L.S.D., a deliberate reference to the drug. Founded in 1979, this multi-ethnic group remains the musical and cultural symbol of the first French skinheads: those from the Les Halles neighbourhood in Paris, where one of their meeting places was the aptly named Fountain of the Innocent.9

An ‘innocente de la première heure’

There are of course very few documents showing, or even testifying to, the existence of these ‘innocents de la première heure’ [innocents from the outset] or this ‘raya’ [crew] as they liked to call themselves; a mix of punks, skinheads, rockers and squatters of all origins. To my knowledge, only Philippe Puicouyoul has recorded some images on camera in the introductory scenes to his film La Brune et moi [The Brunette and I]*. Shot in 1978 with a derisory budget, this fictional film documented the Parisian punk micro-world through the figure of Anouschka. A punkette who was just as lost in life as she was on screen, Anouschka embodied a lifestyle that chose the street as its backdrop. The film’s title and much of its narrative structure were borrowed from the famous film The Girl Can’t Help It (screened in France under the title La Blonde et moi, or ‘The Blonde and I’) which came out in America in 1956, with Jayne Mansfield in top billing and many future rock ‘n’ roll stars. The French street film painted the picture of a lost young woman devoid of musical talent who nonetheless aspired to becoming a punk anti-star. To the backdrop of a soundtrack by Parisian artists such as Les Privés, Edith Nylon, Ici Paris and Marquis de Sade, Anouschka’s short epic tale shows her as a heroine drowning in heroin rather than flying the musical flag of her generation.

And in fact, the real Anouschka died shortly after the filming. There was little distance between role and reality for this young woman devoted to provoking and shocking others, through a ‘carnivalization’ (Langman, 2008) of her appearance but also a deeper attack on her body, in the shape of repeated substance abuse. Day after day, the jabs of the needle beat out a form of nihilistic resistance to all the traps of normalisation that she seemed to want to denounce, without finding the right words to describe them. Did the needle make any more sense? One way or another, on screen we see Anouschka melt away slowly as she abandons herself to oblivion, sinking into the effects of the powder she heats over her spoon every day before mixing it with her blood.10 This paradoxical path, where the tools of escape ultimately become the tools of confinement, was perfectly captured with both concision and cold precision in music by Camera Silens, a group from Bordeaux*. They refer to a supposed ‘moyen de sortir de l’impasse’ [way out of the rut] or ‘vaccin contre l’angoisse’ [vaccination against anxiety] that requires nothing more than a vein and they describe how a new suffering of loss and lack then becomes instilled in the depths of the flesh, ensnaring its prisoner in the hazy and gloomy repetition of a ‘journée sans fin’ [endless day] (Camera Silens, ‘Réalité’ [Reality], 1985)*. The cycle of continuous suffering followed by paying to consume a substance that can offer a brief moment of respite leaves little room for revolt and its giddy hopes for independence, as they are consumed by the harshest of all consumer dependencies.
Many of the ‘innocents de la première heure’ also followed this emblematic path. Fabian, one of the pillars of the *raya*, testified to this as he recalled that ‘the Halles gang, it wasn’t another gang that got them, it was drugs’. Urban legend has often tended to forget heroin, preferring to underscore the subversive heroism of these clans in a tradition built up step-by-step, forbidden tale by forbidden tale, told by street storytellers over beer or something stronger, building up and tearing down the street stories that give material substance to the ‘zone’. The *zone* is not so much confined to a specific physical space as it is deployed in all the spaces of the city where *zonards* take it. It evolves with them, they map it out, they tell its tales, always conveyed by a storyteller giving...
them material substance, choosing things from reality, with more or less talent, in order to build up legends. And these legends tell of all those ‘chemins de nulle part qui nous conduisent ailleurs’ [paths from nowhere that lead us elsewhere] as French punk group Komintern Sect put it (‘Quand meurent les légendes’ [When legends die], 1983)*. They are only ever made up of ‘the sum of what it said about’ them (Foucault, 1979 [1977]: 162), but these street tales nonetheless have the power to open up pathways for encounters between people speaking about freedom, a freedom for which they have paid the high street price.

**Embodying the street and recounting its pitfalls**

This legendary topography of extra-urban rebellion traced out the symbolic coordinates of the lifestyle Yvan and his group of friends adopted 15 years after what was, in a way, the founding meeting of the ‘innocents de la première heure’. Based in a town in the North East of France, this heterogeneous group numbered shaved heads and punks, tattoos and dreadlocks, and a wealth of other mixed features. Like many others scattered across France, they came together to embody revolt in a variety of different ways and brandished their own infamy as a flag, using physical appearance to signal their desire to resist the established order through a negative confrontation with its norms. The oldest were only a little over 30 years and most of them killed time in the streets of the town centre, talking, smoking joints and drinking some dubious brew or other, usually made from cheap wine and fizzy drinks. After years of pounding the pavement of these streets, Yvan had become a central figure. Full of the street knowledge that had shaped him since he was 12 years, this experience had a bitter edge to it. He knew that moments of freedom came at the price of servitude and that some of the poisons that were easy to get hold of on the edges of society often turned on those who tried to rise up against that very society: ‘you buy the street and the street buys you’, he used to say. And he added,

> You’ve got your little business selling dope [hash], speed, trips [LSD], or birdie powder [cocaine/heroin] that means you can get by and helps out your friends and so-called friends, but you often take what you sell and bit by bit you get caught in the trap … (Yvan, excerpt from interview recorded on 18 April 2002)

**‘La rage au ventre’**

And this trap closed in on many an urban golem. Some have spoken out publicly about their struggle, such as Farid Hadj in the film *Hamsa. La rage au ventre* [Hamsa, Seething with Rage] by Manu Bonmariage in 1996. Farid, known as Fa or Rifâ, was the central figure in the group the ‘innocents de la première heure’ mentioned previously. He had haunted the Parisian streets throughout the 1980s, rising up from its interstitial spaces as a drug dealer’s worst nightmare. As he robbed dealers day after day, an increasingly large proportion of the powder he stole ended up coursing through his own veins, progressively taking away everything dangerous about him until it nearly took his life too. When Manu Bonmariage filmed Farid in 1995, the Parisian streets were already far behind him. A ghost had emerged from the darkness. Farid was suffering from AIDS, a shadow of his
former self, drawn and haggard as the disease ate away at him. That is what *Hamsa, la rage au ventre* was about: disease, but also balancing the books of a life story where things just don’t even out, between dealing with the legacies of immigration and being discredited due to a deprived *banlieue* background, between blind vengeance and buried hatred. The Good, the Bad, and … the one who loses: Farid was all three at once. As he recounted his story, he spoke to his old mate Pierre about his bitterness in front of Manu Bonmariage’s camera. Like Farid, Pierre came from a deprived housing estate in Bois-Colombes, just outside Paris. Like Farid, he had formerly been part of the skinheads in the Les Halles neighbourhood in Paris. He had also left the streets, and retreated with his wife and children to the Nièvre area in central France, where he composed his first reggae album. Farid sometimes played the harmonica for him. As for Pierre, just one of many estate kids hardened by the concrete landscape in which they grew up, he was soon to become well known in the music industry and among the general public under the name Pierpoljak, a name concentrating or compiling anonymous figures (‘Pierre, Paul, Jacques’ being the French equivalent of ‘Tom, Dick or Harry’). The ‘*mec bien*’ [decent bloke] (1996)* that he sang about was no doubt the man Farid would have liked to be, although he never quite managed it. Nowadays, he has chosen the path of what he calls his ‘return to Islam’. The struggle continues. A struggle that most of his street companions have fought, and often lost, in complete anonymity.

This brings us back to the clan to which Yvan belonged. Ultimately, its members followed paths not that dissimilar to Farid’s. While Manu Bonmariage’s investigation has left us a cinematic trace of the latter, I pieced together the biographies of the former based on my position as direct witness to the main stages of their evolution in the *zone*. In 1992, when our paths first crossed, Yvan was introduced to me by Didier, a 6′2″ intimidating shadow skirting through the night-time alleyways of a town centre he knew like the back of his hand. Gavroche had haunted the same alleyways when he left prison. In a bid to leave behind other towns where he had a certain reputation, he had come to ours, which was new enough to draw him there and where he had a lasting memory of a concert by the Washington Dead Cats (an emblematic group of the French alternative scene)* with an electric audience, partly galvanised by Didier’s unbridled energy. After meeting up again with this one-time drinking partner and discovering a kindred spirit in the shape of Yvan, Gavroche was soon welcomed into the clan:

> He came out of prison, we just came across each other, you know. I’d been kicked out again for the millionth time, I had all my gear on my back, and before leaving I’d totally raided my dad’s wine cellar. I had, I dunno, like five or six litres of schnapps [a liqueur from the East of France] in the bag: we really lived it up! Then, Gavroche and me, we opened some squats. (Yvan, excerpt from interview recorded on 20 June 2002)

Many urban legends began to circulate about this very particular individual. He had a psycho-rocker look, a legacy of his time spent in the Maraîchers squat in Paris, sporting triple-sole Creepers (the thick shoes worn by the first generations of rockers) and wearing his hair in a flattop with dyed blue tips, although Yvan wasted no time in bringing him in line with a more traditional skinhead model. Gavroche’s street cred remained unchanged, however. He was unrivalled as a thief and experienced as a burglar, but also
a dealer, an expert in violent theft and sometimes even a conman-pedlar (selling cards or other objects door-to-door, supposedly aimed at ‘rehabilitating troubled youth’). In short, his career in the zone drew on well-honed skills in survival know-how. He cut an imposing figure on the streets, not so much due to his size, his clothing or his appearance – covered in tattoos – as due to his experience of the streets that was plain to see in his black distrustful look suggesting it was best to keep one’s distance. He made no bones about dealing out beatings to ensure he got the respect he was due, an exercise in physical violence that he accomplished with consummate, if unpleasant, skill. He would ‘punish’ his victims in public, making them into examples for anyone who might have thought

about taking him on and using fear to ensure deference. From his point of view, this was called ‘laying down the ground rules’. It was about ensuring safety, something constantly under threat for people like him, Yvan, or Didier, who were streetwise and could sense the dangers but also exploit the evils of that world. They wore out their bodies before their time and aged before their time too. They were no longer recognisable as twenty-somethings, too damaged by abuse of heroin, alcohol and the other bitter substances that constantly injected undertones of rage and aggression into each of their smiles.

As the years went by, their faces grew more and more worn, particularly Yvan’s. The 15-stone body that used to stand so tall, proudly displaying its tattoos, slowly withered. As it began to buckle, rebellion followed suit and he went over to the dark side. The tablets and heroin – as well as their secondary effects, in the shape of anxiety attacks, hepatitis and eventually AIDS – ultimately got the better of this former rebel, whose agitation was now only focused on the present and the necessities of survival. More than one of the cocky braggarts I had known in the past ended up like Yvan, having drained the strength from their veins day after day. As heroin literally ate through their former courage, as their teeth dropped out one after another, the pain of withdrawal became all the more intense and would sometimes lead them to abandon any sense of ethics. As victim after victim fell prey to this new form of narcotic sociality, the self-sufficiency of the clan was powerless to resist. The imperious necessity of physical dependency soon replaced any other ties, wearing away at friendships on a daily basis as life became about consumption, with no aim other than wrecking their bodies. I could list their names here but it is not up to me to fight for them to be remembered. Instead, I shall simply point out once again the deep irony of fate that transformed these enemies of consumer society into the most avid and submissive of all consumers. That said, one might ask how surprising this really is and whether it couldn’t be seen as a sign of the impossible nature of subverting an established order from its edges, whether such marginal spaces are not necessarily a product of this order and whether, ultimately, any form of resistance is not fated to use weapons that can later be turned against those who wield them.

*Consuming revolution*

Although these questions are central to this article, they are no doubt too complex for a simple ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answer. They have been key issues in the punk movement from its very inception. In 1977, when Joe Strummer, the lead singer and guitarist for The Clash, recounted a reggae gig in London’s Hammersmith Palais where he was one of the only White people present, he drew on this experience to question British post-colonialism and consumer society’s propensity to transform authentic revolt into market commodities. In doing so, he deplored the attitude of new punk rock groups, which he saw as far more concerned with aping a revolutionary pose than writing revolutionary prose and as sufficiently unaware of themselves and the world around them to think it was ‘funny, turning rebellion into money’ (The Clash, ‘[White Man] in Hammersmith Palais’, 1978)*. Later, this critique of ‘turning rebellion into money’ became the title of one of the key albums by the group Conflict (1987)*, one of the emblematic voices of the anarcho-punk trend, the foundations of which have been discussed by Craig O’Hara (1999 [1992]: 70ff). Advocating DIY (‘Do it yourself’) and rejecting all mercantile
relationships, this movement considered independence and self-management as the main driving forces in its acts of resistance. But how can such ideals, combining a sense of conflict and conceptions of a certain revolutionary heroism, be realised when they come up against the hard reality of the streets? Anouschka, Farid, Yvan and the other were all too familiar with this reality and anesthetised their rebellion with the heroin they drew from the streets day in, day out.

However, we choose to answer these questions, it remains difficult to understand or assess these trajectories through the *zone* and its subcultures by calling upon moral considerations judging ‘sins’, whether the betrayal of the rebels’ cause or self-abandonment to the (in)voluntary servitude of addiction. This shows the extent to which the different elements of these marginal figures’ biographies cannot fall under any predictable form of punishment, cannot be framed as the fair and inevitable consequence of an increasingly steep descent they might have traced out themselves. Like others before him, Yvan had chosen to make the first move against these moralising perspectives and had displayed his own crucifixion, tattooed on his skin. ‘Crucified skin’ is one of the strongest symbols of the skinhead movement. It shows a faceless skinhead nailed to a cross in the position of Christ, an anonymous figure of social sacrifice that often begins in the upper part of the abdominals with the arms extending upwards on the pectoral muscles. Of course this symbol of the man who faced the greatest prejudice also has a flip side, namely, victimisation and abdication. Nonetheless, it still signals an awareness of both the trap and its inevitable results, much like the image of a spider’s web surrounding the elbow or the spider itself tattooed on the glottis. Just like crucified skin, certain skinheads and punks use these ritual tattoos to signal that they are bogged down in the dropout zone, roaming an abandoned marginal space inhabited only by arachnids. Ralf Marsault and Heino Muller’s (1990) photographic work *Fin de siècle* [End of a century], published under their label ‘25/34 photographes’, takes the reader through la zone in 1980s Paris, London and Berlin and presents a broad selection of this ink on the skins of those who chose marginal life, with its revolt and its renouncement. Most of these signs also decorated the skin of Yvan and his friends.

**Conclusion – Portraits of life in the margins: A street phenomenology**

The aim of this article has been to paint some portraits of marginal life on the streets, the backdrop for punk and skinhead experiences in France. This phenomenological variation of portraits has provided a range of perspectives on subcultural engagement and, in doing so, has drawn on observation and interviews as well as auto-ethnography and a critical examination of text, music and film archives. Beyond individual differences, one key characteristic emerged at the intersection of these fragments of experiences and biographies. In all the cases I examined, the street came to represent both a heroine and heroin. It represented the glorified public stage of resistance to the values of ‘straight’ life (a kind of heroine in their stories) and, at the same time, the addictive substance (heroin) capable of melting away any remnants of revolt. This contradiction, which emerges from every silhouette outlined in this article, refrares an old question in subcultural analysis: the
question of the efficiency and limitations of subcultural actors’ resistance against the norms and lifestyles chosen by established society.

Subcultural resistance: Between alternatives, oppositions and contradictions

We have seen that, in many ways, the British researchers who founded subcultural analysis answered the question posed above with the same arguments as the most committed punks. Indeed, at the end of the 1970s, the latter denounced the way rebellion and its symbols had been converted into consumer products. In doing so, they also traced a symbolic boundary between the ‘real’ members of the scene, who adopted its codes and an authentically rebellious lifestyle, and those who were only ‘pretenders’ and whose lack of authenticity revealed their fake engagement. The latter appeared to the former as simply motivated by a passing taste for a music and fashion trend that they would walk away from as soon as they tired of this symbolic provocative game (on this subject, see the previous discussion, p. 270). There were more of the pretenders, though. Analysts of post-war subcultures therefore viewed most of the symbolic resistance they saw on these stages of working-class protest against bourgeois normativities as nothing more than a passing phase. To use the words of Victor Turner (1977 [1969]), this was framed as a ‘liminal phase’. They were rejecting the hegemonic social norms to which most of them would eventually adhere once they had gone through a certain rite of passage by asserting themselves in this subcultural engagement, with all its oppositional accessories. This idea of youthful identity construction, with components that remain outside the adult world – and so out of its reach – gained some traction in post-subcultural analysis. Researchers working in this field have progressively abandoned the idea of a conflict of norms and social classes that is played out in the arena of subcultures. Instead, they tend to focus on describing the vast symbolic marketplace from which ‘new tribes’ of globalised youth pick out the identity features that contribute to defining them and setting them apart (e.g. Bennett and Kahn-Harris, 2004: 11–14).

But what about the lives and fragments of experience that this article has revealed, in their full punk or skinhead engagement? Unlike the broad (post)subcultural trends identified by the analysts cited above, this phenomenology of the streets has not identified archetypal figures. Instead, it has painted the portraits of various individuals among those who make up the urban legend of subcultures. There is no question here of youthful enthusiasm or oppositional phases. Instead, this is about lives lived entirely on the margins of established society, which they escape much more than they oppose. This therefore means that there is a substantial difference in the types of resistance they are likely to engage in. The researchers at the CCCS were reliant on their Gramscian readings of subcultural conflict as the arena for class struggle among young people. They therefore mainly gave verdicts about the failure of forms of resistance that they saw as essentially symbolic and incapable of changing the material order of inequality. In doing so, they perhaps neglected to take into account the difference established by Raymond Williams (2005 [1973]) between alternative practices and oppositional practices. The latter are about fighting against an established order with a view to toppling it, while the former
are about living differently and, above all, far away from the world order, with no hope nor desire to change it (pp. 41–42). In May 2014, when I finished a series of biographical interviews I had begun a year earlier with Gavroche, I asked him whether he saw his marginal trajectory as an open form of rebellion. He replied, ‘I didn’t really revolt. I took my life in hand. Revolt means fighting society to change it. I didn’t have any ideas for changing society. I made my own path, trying to have my own rules’. This statement is a relatively good summary of the stance taken by most of the punks, skinheads and zonards I have met. The experiences and lifestyles documented in this article therefore belong to this category of alternative practices and nihilistic resistance.

The article has also highlighted their contradictions, though. Because while the women and men discussed here all distanced themselves from established society, salaried employment and consumerism, which they seemed to reject, at the same time, they were all, without exception, the most subservient of consumers when they became dependent on one product – heroin – the economy of which dominated their lives. It would seem that this is where the intrinsic limitations of their alternative resistance lies: the people embodying this resistance both sustain it and, ultimately, destroy it. What, then, of the potential political signification of these alternative lifestyles that seem hard to fit into the idea of subcultural conflict as a youthful extension of class struggle? Addressing this question from a different angle than that taken by post-subcultural studies, which describe these neo-tribes as distanced from any explicit form of politicisation, would require approaching it from the point of view of the ‘infrapolitics of subaltern groups’ (in Scott’s sense, 1990: 183ff). And this, in turn, would require a whole new article. I will therefore bring this one to a close by simply making a few points, which suggest avenues that the all-too-rare research on punk and skinhead experiences in France could pursue in order to explore this infrapolitical angle.

The infrapolitics of subaltern groups and French subcultural struggles

While this text has shown that skinhead culture entered the French scene via certain members of the ‘bande des Halles’ – characterised, in part, by its multi-ethnic make-up – the political radicalisation that took place across the Channel at the end of the 1970s soon made its way into the subcultural experience in France too. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, rival clans fought over the streets of Paris and other French cities, to defend competing representations of dignity and infamy. Anarchism, communism and national socialism were often the radical and uncertain banners being waved as a ‘cause to rally around’. Tai-Luc and La Souris Déglinguée already had their doubts about this cause in 1982 when they sang that the zonards of all kinds ‘fer[aient] n’importe quoi par solidarité’ [would do just about anything out of solidarity] (La Souris Déglinguée, ‘Une cause à rallier’ [a cause to rally around], 1982)*. One way or another, those who took part in this struggle in France are attempting today to bring back its memories through self-produced documentaries, to which far too little attention is paid by researchers. On one hand, there are chronicles of the punks, rockers and other youths of immigrant descent, fighting against the neo-fascist presence in the Parisian public space at the turn of the 1980s. On other hand, in response, others highlight the existence of a ‘French working-class identity’ supposedly threatened both by the elites and by the immigration they
continue to encourage. In the first case, productions such as *The Black Dragons Gang* (2007)* and *Antifa: chasseurs de skins* [Anti-fascists. Skin Hunters] (2008)* offer accounts of the struggles of people from immigrant backgrounds and other anti-fascist groups such as the Ducky Boys or the Red Warriors.

In response to these struggles came a whole other conception of the street, presented under the aegis of Serge Ayoub in the web documentary *Sur les pavés* [On the Streets] (2009)*. One of the French champions of national socialism, Serge Élie Ayoub was known throughout the 1980s by the nickname ‘Batskin’, referring to his skills in wielding a baseball bat. The group Evil Skins was the soundtrack to this Parisian ‘Klan’ with its self-proclaimed stupidity and nastiness (‘Bêtes et méchants’ [Stupid and nasty], 1987)
sung by Iman Zarandifar, known as ‘Sniff’. These strange ‘white rebels’ had a ‘double consciousness’ divided between their Lebanese (Batskin) or Iranian (Sniff) origins and their opinionated defence of a Western world rid of all the ‘fellah peoples’ from the Orient, the people that Oswald Spengler (1928 [1923]) already described at the turn of the 20th century as an itinerant threat weighing upon Western culture supposedly under siege and threatened with decline (p. 157ff). Whatever the positions taken up by different individuals in this fratricidal struggle, where opposing elements are sometimes combined in one person, these figures of the street and their ethno-biographies – which remain largely to be traced – are much more than simply an anecdotal embodiment of infrapolitical extremism.
Adopting a multimodal approach to their world, by taking into account the full network of documents and archives they have produced, affords an inside understanding of their lives but also of the moral and political economies underpinning them. These elements are often all too absent from French sociology of ‘gangs of youths’, attached by definition to the variable of age and strongly imprinted with the trope of immigration, confined to the analysis of banlieue situations (e.g. Mohammed, 2011). Contrary to these perspectives, which produce scientific archetypal representations of reality based on preconceived concepts and categories, the investigative approach that I defend in this article opens up a new avenue. A phenomenology of the streets, capable of reproducing the conceptions of the people who actually experience these streets, who make up the existence of subcultures, the history and vernacular significations of which remain – at least in the case of France – an underexplored research direction.

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Notes

1. The expression is Dick Hebdige’s (e.g. 2003 [1979]: 2 and 139). It refers to the ‘straight’ world of institutions and spaces regulated by law.
2. The musical and film references followed by an asterisk can be consulted on a YouTube playlist created for this purpose and available at the following link: https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLLwXIF-zRV19EATqV15W5HADQIme5vcoY. The playlist was compiled from material already uploaded by other users.
3. In the summer of 2011, Hudson Vincent conducted 14 interviews with some of the most key actors of the CCCS, including Stuart Hall, Angela McRobbie, Paul Gilroy and John Clarke. This resulted in a real oral history of the centre, published in 2013 in the journal Cultural Studies. In this history, the conceptions and theoretical influences indicated in the previous paragraph are put into the context of the researchers’ daily work. For a presentation of the project and a discussion of what we can learn from it, see Vincent (2013).
4. On this idea of a ‘naturalist’ approach to subcultures, of which participant observation is one of the mainstays, see in particular the texts published by Brian Roberts and Steve Butters in the methodological section of Resistance through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain (Hall and Jefferson, 2004 [1975]: 243–273).
5. On the use of this method in analysing and describing life-worlds, see, in particular, Honer and Hitzler (2015).
6. In English, this conceptual trope of the street as heroin(e) may give the impression that the street is being ‘feminised’ – it could obviously also have been described as a hero. This is not the case in French, however, where ‘street’ is a feminine noun. A translation choice was made here to keep the original sound of the French, in order to mark the double meaning.
of heroin(e) in English. However, Michaeline Crichlow (the editor for *Cultural Dynamics*, whom I thank for her remark) makes the point that feminising the street as heroine in this way makes it appear as a mother figure for the punks and skinheads it shelters. If this is the case, Crichlow stated, one might then question the type of mother that such a street could be, since she seems less to protect her children than to abandon them to their harsh fates. While the problem is posed in this text, it is far from being solved. And it also relates to many other groups besides punks and skinheads encountered in this article, which tries to uncover something of what it means to live, but also to get old and sometimes die, on the street. Clearly then, this is a line of inquiry that could be pursued in the future.

7. Paul Gilroy (2002 [1993]) has theorised these intersecting legacies in the countercultures of modernity that derive from the transnational space he designates as the ‘Black Atlantic’. As for the first academic analyses of skinhead cultures, these were conducted by John Clarke (in Hall and Jefferson, 2004 [1975]: 99–102).

8. While *Skinhead Moonstomp* (1969) by the Anglo-Caribean group Symarip remains an emblematic album of the original movement, the early skinheads’ taste for soul music and reggae evolved over the generations, moving on to include the English renaissance of ska at the end of the 1970s (Heathcott, 2003) and then the aggressive forms of punk rock known under the term ‘Oi!’, a call that preceded many a street fight. On the subject of this evolution in musical styles and tastes in the skinhead movement, see in particular, Back, 2000; Brown, 2004.

9. The words in inverted commas in the last few lines are allusions to some of La Souris Déglinguée’s major songs, ‘Partie de la jeunesse’ [Part of Youth] (1983)* and ‘Saint-Sauveur’ [Saviour Saint] (1984)*. In 2011, the French publisher Camion Blanc, specialising in chronicling different rock movements, published the biography of this emblematic French underground group. Written by Olivier Richard, the book was followed a few months later by a collection of ‘30 acid tales’ (Levasseur, 2011) dedicated to the spirit of La Souris Déglinguée, forged in the melting pot of Les Halles.

10. The biographical information on which these remarks are based can be found in the interview with Philippe Puicouyoul in the bonus segments of the DVD.

11. Interview with Ben, who runs ‘skinzine’, *Une vie pour rien?* (an alternative magazine chronicling skinhead culture). Published in issue no. 5 in November 2001, the full interview can be accessed here on the author’s blog: http://benjamos.free.fr/frames/fabian.htm (accessed September 2016).

12. Originally, this term referred to the non aedificandi zone (i.e. where no building was permitted) extending beyond the fortifications of Paris. After the 1870 war, the exclusively military use of this space was progressively abandoned and it made way for the installation of huts, caravans and slums grouping together poor workers, rag-and-bone men, beggars and other members of the ‘dangerous classes’ of which Louis Chevalier has provided a historiography (Chevalier, 2000 [1958]). On the margins of Paris, and until the end of the 1960s, the ‘zoniers’ or inhabitants of that zone embodied the figure of the urban pariah, which concerned or threatened bourgeois society. Today’s *zonards* share that negative label with their predecessors. However, they form a new stratum of the archaeology of urban margins, one that is recent, but that has syncretic roots far from the ancient fortifications of the city, in the intertwining of punk and traveller subcultures born on the other side of the Channel in the 1970s and 1980s.

13. In France, for various reasons, many suburbs around major cities are economically deprived zones and the term *banlieue* conjures up images of urban decay and violence, with similar connotations as those associated with the British term ‘inner city’.

14. This tendency to frame marginal trajectories within a form of morality that supposedly gives them meaning while deciding what is ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ can be found in the normative
positions adopted by some of those within the movements themselves (Craig O’Hara, 1999 [1992] provides several examples). It is also present in the action research undertaken from the outside by professionals, such as those at the Centres d’Entraînement aux Méthodes d’Éducation Active (CEMEA – Centres for Training in Methods of Active Education) that focus on the issue of troubled youths in France (see, in particular, Chobeaux, 2004 [1996]).

References


**Testimonies, films, documents**


**Musical References**


**Author biography**

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