Rage in the city of angels: The historical development of the skinhead subculture in Los Angeles

Pete George Simi

University of Nevada, Las Vegas

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RAGE IN THE CITY OF ANGELS: THE HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE SKINHEAD SUBCULTURE IN LOS ANGELES

by

Pete Simi

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Washington State University
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Master of Arts
University of Nevada, Las Vegas
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Pete Simi

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Examination Committee Chair

Dean of the Graduate College

Examination Committee Member

Graduate College Faculty Representative
ABSTRACT

Rage in the City of Angels: the Historical Development of the Skinhead Subculture in Los Angeles

by

Pete Simi

Dr. Barbara Brents and Dr. Simon Gottschalk, Examination Committee Chair(s)
Professor(s) of Sociology
University of Nevada-Las Vegas

This study examines the historical development of the racist skinhead subculture in Los Angeles. The skinhead subculture is a highly diverse network of gangs that has experienced significant changes over the last twenty-five years. I use an in-depth case study approach that relies upon extensive observation of and interviews with current and former skinheads to explain how and why L.A. skinhead gangs have changed over time. I argue that the Los Angeles skinhead subculture has moved through three phases of organizational emphasis which I characterize respectively as social, political, and economic oriented gangs. My aim is to analyze how skinheads have absorbed differing and almost contradictory elements since emerging in Los Angeles. In doing so, I show the plasticity and flexibility of skinhead gangs as they adapt and respond to wider social changes and thus challenge previous scholarship that view gang subcultures as relatively static, unchanging phenomena.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This study is about youthful rebels and street gangs, specifically the stylistic innovation, social protest, and organized crime among racist skinheads in Los Angeles that has occurred over the past twenty-five years'. I argue that the Los Angeles skinhead subculture has moved through three phases of organizational emphasis which I characterize respectively as social, political, economic oriented gangs. My aim is to analyze how this subculture has absorbed differing and almost contradictory elements since it emerged in the United States during the late 1970s. In doing so, I show the plasticity and flexibility of skinhead gangs as they adapt and respond to wider social changes and thus challenge previous scholarship that view gang subcultures as relatively static, unchanging phenomena.

I use an in-depth case study approach to understand and explain how and why L.A. skinhead gangs have changed over time². Some scholars have argued that skinheads are a largely homogenous group attempting to create a fixed identity. I disagree. The racist skinhead subculture is a highly diverse network of gangs that has gone through significant changes since its emergence in Los Angeles in 1978. To describe these changes, I present this case as an analytic chronology, tracing three episodes: the initial formation of social gangs, gang politicization, and the emergence of criminal gang syndicates. Social gangs are primarily organized around fraternal relations among gang members and conflict between other gangs. Social gangs are involved in non-specialized criminal activities (e.g. vandalism, fighting, and petty theft). Political gangs are organized around an explicit political ideology
and engage in a variety of political activity. Compared to the petty criminal activity of social gangs, the crimes of political gangs are inspired by an explicit and organized racist political agenda. For economic gangs, the racist political agenda is secondary to the primary aim of profit-oriented criminal enterprise and members view themselves as business entrepreneurs (see Padilla 1992).

To be clear, however, these phases are neither neat nor homogeneous developments that result from consensus toward change within the broader skinhead subculture. Instead, there are internal struggles between gangs and their members, on-going conflict with outside authorities, and cooperation with other deviant subcultures. Conflicts and coalitions shape these phases of development, making them highly dynamic, complex, overlapping, and, thus difficult to describe. I hope to capture this dynamism, especially the ebb and flow of groups into and out of the successive phases of subcultural change.

The question who are the skinheads has been too often met with pat responses that conceal more than they reveal. One typical response to this question often posits that skinheads are simply another sector of the white supremacy movement. The problem with this approach is that it ignores the specific dimensions of skinheads that analytically set them apart from the wider white supremacy movement. Skinheads are characterized by members' youthfulness and distinguish themselves with specific styles (e.g. shaved heads, military flight jackets, Doctor Marten steel-toed work boots, and tattoos). Prior studies (Dobratz and Shanks-Meule 1997; Hamm 1993; Moore 1993) reveal that the links forged between skinheads and adult white supremacist organizations (e.g. White Aryan Resistance) were one of the most important developments in the skinhead subculture. Yet, there has been little effort among social scientists to analyze exactly how these links were formed or whether these relationships are tightly or loosely coupled and how these relationships have changed over time. There is a need for inductive research that is sensitive to skinhead development and does not assume that transitional phases are inevitable thereby making explanation unnecessary. This dissertation takes an inductive approach and relies
upon ethnographic techniques to analyze the historical development of the skinhead subculture.

Theoretical Considerations of the Case

The case of skinheads raises a number of important theoretical questions pertaining to the development of subcultural formations and the processes that strengthen and weaken them. How did racism become central to a group's collective identity? What are the effects of subcultural schisms? Why do some gangs gain an increased sense of political awareness, while others develop a "hedonistic" economic orientation? Lastly, skinheads force us to ask questions about the relationship between gangs, subcultures, and social movements. For example, when do these phenomena begin to overlap with one another and what causes this type of convergence.

Scholars know little about the changes in gang subcultures over time because research using a longitudinal perspective is rare (Short 1990), and while, gang researchers have identified different types of gangs, they have been less interested in analyzing the diversity existent within a gang subculture (for the few exceptions see Brotherton forthcoming; Venkatesh 2000; Schneider 1999; Moore 1991). Not only have researchers been especially neglectful of how street gangs become politicized (Brotherton 1999), the question of gang politicization also directly confronts the criminological tendency toward static conceptions. Ignoring how gangs develop and unfold over time leads to a view of them as static and homogeneous (Moore 1994), and reflects our disciplinary bias toward discovering "like­ness" and persistent patterns over time. While these endeavors are certainly valuable, they can also restrict our awareness of diversity and dynamism within complex social phenomena like street gangs. The ephemeral is often ignored while stability or permanence is privileged in explanations. For example, researchers often neglect that most street gangs either fail to exist much longer than initial formation, or experience significant changes over time (Klein 1995). Instead, we are typically provided with stagnant conceptualization
and an over-reliance upon discrete analytic boundaries for explanations. Recently, the life course theorist Robert Sampson advanced such an argument about criminological theory: "Most criminological theory is static in logic and handicapped by a focus on (allegedly) fixed explanatory categories, thereby failing to address the processes and dynamics leading to criminal events" (2000:711). The problem, according to Sampson, is not just an over-reliance upon cross-sectional data, but a neglect of how social processes lead to development, mutation, and transformation of phenomena over time.

Although theoretical abstractions that neatly categorize (and, thus, oversimplify) the skinheads are easy enough to conceive, I chose a different tactic. I could easily talk about a growing alienation from a world no longer "familiar" or the political economy of late-capitalism putting the "squeeze" on the middle and lower classes, it is more insightful to reconstruct the emergence of the skinhead subculture from the vantage point of the actual participants. Ultimately, empirically-driven work that is sensitive to within-group difference and developmental change over time is what helps "improve theories" (Lofland 1993) by directing attention to the "unfolding of social action, processes, and change within both individuals and communities (Sampson 2000:713).

The case of the skinheads also reveals that ephemerality and longevity are not necessarily mutually exclusive, and that subcultures can exhibit a great degree of transience and continuity. The dynamism of social action tells us about the importance of opportunities for spontaneous and often short-lived experimentation, yet we also know that too much flexibility is not conducive to organizational development. As Tarrow (1998) puts it,

"The problem for [movements]...is to create organizational models that are sufficiently robust to structure sustained relations with opponents, but are flexible enough to permit the informal connections that link people and networks to one another to aggregate and coordinate contention. (P. 124)"

Finally, skinheads also illustrate that, in contrast to overly-structural views that reduce gang subcultures to mere reflections of the economy or culture, these subcultures are also
collectives of individuals who are not only influenced by their environment, but who also shape it.

Situating the Case

The white supremacy movement (WSM) is generally portrayed as a “fragmented, decentralized, and often sectarian network” (Burris, Smith, and Strahm 2000: 218) of overlapping groups such as the Ku Klux Klan, Christian Identity sects, and neo-Nazis (Dobratz and Shanks-Meile 1997). The Klan is the oldest and, historically, the most influential organization in the WSM, with roots dating to late-nineteenth century Reconstruction. In the 1920s, Klan membership expanded to a high of between 1.5 and 5 million followers of the group’s anti-immigrant, anti-Catholic, social purity ideals (MacLean 1994; Moore 1991; Chalmers 1968; Jackson 1967). The civil rights movement of the 1960s sparked another wave of Klan activism and violence (Dobratz and Shanks-Meile 1997; Chalmers 1987; Wade 1987), which gave way to (mostly failed) attempts at creating a more polished, legitimate, politically viable Klan in the 1970s and 1980s (e.g., Klan leader David Duke’s entry into electoral politics). The roots of Christian Identity sects can be traced back to nineteenth century British Israelism, which claimed that the “true” Israelites were Anglo-Saxons. The Americanized version that emerged in the early twentieth century contends that Jews are the literal children of Satan, African-Americans are “pre-Adamic”—”mudpeople” (Barkun 1994), while Anglo Christians are God’s chosen race. The neo-Nazi branch of the WSM is rooted in the 1950s American Nazi Party, which organized around Adolf Hitler’s racial purity ideals. As Burris, Smith, and Strahm (2000: 218) point out, umbrella groups such as the Aryan Nation (AN) have led to a synthesis of Nazi symbols and ideology, along with Christian Identity theology.

Although variations in beliefs exist among different sectors of the WSM, there is widespread agreement regarding the belief in “white power” and the commitment to defend the “white race” from “genocide”. The source of this perceived genocide is the
Zionist Occupational Government (ZOG), a worldwide Jewish conspiracy that aims to mongrelize the races and create a one-world government (Ferber 1998). According to the white supremacist perspective, ZOG's influence is evident in everything from the lenient U.S. domestic policy regarding "illegal immigration" to affirmative action (i.e. "reverse racism") to the liberal promotion of abortion that is disproportionately used against white babies (i.e. "white genocide"). The ZOG rhetoric was developed and disseminated during the late 1970s and early 1980s by several American racist organizations. Since then, it has profoundly affected the white supremacy movement, offering activists across the globe a common vocabulary (Fangen 1998; Kaplan and Bjorgo 1998; Loowe 1998).

While the context of this study is the western urban (and suburban) metropolis of Los Angeles from the "Reagan-era" to the present (1978-2002), I also extend the analysis to make some sense of the racial conflict that besieges all regions of the U.S. I am neither evaluating the morality of the skinhead subculture, nor am I evaluating whether skinheads were justified in forming such a subculture. Skinheads themselves feel justified in their beliefs and actions. Some skinheads articulate this justification on the grounds that forming these gangs was the only response possible, a kind of "last resort" to defend themselves against "non-white" street gangs. Others justify the formation of skinhead gangs not only as a necessity, but as part of a humanitarian (read "white race") service that will one day be rewarded with honor. In this sense, anything less than skinhead participation is unthinkable. What interests me then is what led to their emergence and how skinhead organizations have changed over time.

Skinheads have received significant attention from the media and "watchdog" organizations, but little from sociological research (for exceptions see Blazak 2001; Blazak and Wooden 2001; Wood 1999; Baron 1997; Moore 1993; Hamm 1993). Although these previous studies offer important insight, they suffer from a number of weaknesses. First, they tend to be cross-sectional and treat participation as a static variable. Second, when they address issues of subcultural emergence, they focus at a broad national level, leaving
local nuances unexamined. This macro type of approach makes it difficult to examine the changes in the skinhead subculture. In contrast, I utilize a longitudinal design that allows for the exploration of social processes facilitating different trajectories in skinhead development and the effects these will have on the future of the skinhead subculture. Further, I selected a limited geographic locale to enable an in-depth examination of skinhead emergence and development.

According to some observers, the first American youth movement to espouse a Nazi ideology emerged in the late 1970s and early 1980s (SPLC 1991; ADL 1989). Unlike earlier rebellious youth like the longhaired hippies of the 1960s who preached "free-love" or the mohawked punks of the 1970s screaming anarchy, skinheads gained a reputation (aside from shaved heads) for their hateful ideology, and unprovoked bias-motivated violence. Consequently they quickly became one of America's most feared "folk devils" (Cohen 1980). The media and watchdog organizations (e.g. Anti-Defamation League, Southern Poverty Law Center) have focused on promoting the sensational aspects of the skinheads without providing in-depth and thorough analyses (Blee 2002; Moore 1993). For example, skinheads have been portrayed as "neo-Nazis" and "little Hitlers spewing hateful venom" (for similar points see Blee 2002; Aho 1990); and while these characterizations may accurately describe some segments of the skinhead subculture, they have simultaneously skewed our perceptions of skinheads, and represented them as a homogenous and unchanging group. As a result, we miss the processes that influence subcultural emergence and trajectories toward the embracing of fascist politics, and also profit-oriented criminal activity with little commitment to political ideology. Assigning loaded and defamatory labels allows us to dismiss populations as undeserving of systematic and careful investigation (Aho 1990). Terms such as "neo-Nazi" have a strong connotation, that when used without care, lose significance. The implications for misusing these terms are far-reaching, requiring various segments of the population to reconsider their discursive strategies. The label "haters," "fanatics," and "thugs" also dismiss the elements of rationality that make
racist views seem plausible given a specific set of conditions. This study attempts to understand the organization of racism among skinheads gangs without simply dismissing these individuals as pathological and unfit for scholarly attention.

In light of the relatively little social scientific research on skinheads, I found insight in the studies examining the biographical consequences of political activism (Sherkat and Blocker 1997; Braungart and Braungart 1990; McAdam 1989, 1988; Whalen and Flacks 1989; Fendrich and Lovoy 1988; Demartini 1985). In contrast to the portrayals of 60s activists that suggested a “sell-out” or “Big Chill” thesis, these studies found that political attitudes remain consistent, and although the level of political activism declines, many channel their activism in more institutional directions (e.g. working in the social service sector). However, this research relied almost exclusively upon left-wing youthful activists as subjects. Accordingly, I wanted to analyze whether similar outcomes hold for activists on the “far right,” specifically among racist skinheads. The emergence of skinheads in the U.S. during the late 1970s meant that more than twenty years had elapsed since the subculture’s “early risers.” By studying the lives of some of the “early” racist skinheads, I hoped to identify how skinhead participation affected their later adult lives. How many had moved onto more “conventional” lives? How many were still active participants? What was the nature of their participation? How many had long since moved on, but remained faithful to the skinhead ideology? These initial questions motivated my research.

To answer them, I began thinking about how one might find the subjects who could provide this type of information. This is no easy task, as a national directory of U.S. skinheads does not exist. I used snowball-sampling techniques in the Los Angeles area where the largest number of skinheads exist (Moore 1993; ADL 1989), and I was hoping to discover the “original skinhead group” in the U.S., an organized cadre of activists who would provide the answers to all my questions (and even better yet, a membership roster dating back to the beginning). It did not take long for me to realize that skinheads are not easy to research. They are often transient, and participation is fluid. To make matters even
more complicated, skinheads often have multiple memberships, lack group-specific loyalty, and in some cases maintain an “independent” status by abstaining from any formal organizational affiliation. Because of such diversity and seeming “incoherence,” I realized that it would be necessary to first analyze the emergence, genesis, and current trends existing in the wider skinhead subculture before examining the individual career paths of skinheads.

Unlike the middle-class white youths who participated in the Civil Rights Movement during the 1960s (McAdam 1988), skinheads are not active on behalf of an identified disaffected population, but rather see themselves as the disenfranchised. In light of their predominantly male status, middle-class background, and white skin, this perception is difficult for many to understand. The lack of correspondence with traditional categories of those who have experienced “injustice” requires that skinheads accomplish a significant amount of “ideological work” (Berger 1981) to help define their feelings of dispossession. By framing themselves as “working-class,” white kids who are the “new minority” they tap into the cultural heritage of working and minority populations’ efforts toward social justice. In this sense, skinheads illustrate the elasticity of identities built around feelings of disaffection from the status quo.

Developing racist youth gangs in one of the world’s most diverse areas present many challenges. In the city of Los Angeles alone, more than 10,000 gang members have reportedly been identified, of which the vast majority is classified as “minority” populations (Klein 1995). During the last twenty years, skinheads have not only faced hostility from opposing subcultures, but also law enforcement, schools, watchdog organizations and general community efforts (e.g. the creation of community-based human rights commissions). As I illustrate in chapter 5, these constraints limited skinhead politicization and hampered building the kind of coherent movement student activists of the 1960s and 1970s developed. Instead, skinheads are an amalgam of “subterranean” (Matza and Sykes 1961) elements including cultural/stylistic, political, and criminal currents that not only reflect “warring” factions, but also unexpected alliances. Individual skinheads often inte-
grate seemingly unrelated subcultural currents by submerging themselves within various smaller skinhead cliques that often have different and even competing value orientations. These cliques are neither wholly distinct nor completely integrated with each other. There are important overlaps, but not always a shared correspondence. For example, a skinhead may emphasize a political ideology and maintain a formal affiliation with an organization that promotes racial separatism and political revolution, while simultaneously maintaining close ties with organizations that, although racist, are otherwise a-political and more interested in profit-motivated criminal operations. At times, while these high levels of diversity lead to internal conflicts and rivalries, they also provide a mechanism for highly flexible relationships and multiple forms of skinhead participation. Skinhead participants often have widely varying orientations ranging from economic goals surrounding drug sales to political goals inspired by white separatism, and in some cases, strict adherence to neo-Nazism. These orientations constitute a skinhead continuum, where divergent ends are connected by a web of interlocking associations. What is surprising about these relationships is that they often exist in contradiction to stated rhetorical claims by skinhead organizations and organizational leaders. However, instead of weakening ideological bases, these relationships often help diminish existing isolation between skinhead gangs.

Historical Context

Before examining the skinheads, it is critical to familiarize ourselves with the historical context from which this youth subculture emerged. The remainder of this chapter discusses the diverse social forces that these youths faced in a volatile and ever-changing world. These changes included economic, political, cultural, and demographic ones, some of which I discuss within a national context and others as specific to the Los Angeles area. This discussion is not meant to suggest a causal link between social changes and the emergence of the skinheads, but rather provides readers with a sense of the social and political landscape that skinheads inhabit. Understanding the landscape that preceded the...
emergence of skinheads helps prevent viewing them as a “foreign” aberration that had no roots in the local or national culture. My argument is that skinheads (and gang subcultures generally) are a response to external conditions; sometimes skinheads mimic these environmental characteristics and sometimes they oppose them, but skinheads are never simply a pure reflection of the larger social structure (Brake 1985; Cohen 1972). Examining surrounding social conditions is not enough to understand skinheads; researchers must also examine the internal structure of skinhead gangs and skinheads' perceptions of the social world.

The 1970s and 1980s were marked by important economic transformations. Manufacturing declined while trade and budget deficits soared, shifting the U.S. from a creditor to a debtor nation (Harvey 1989). Since the 1970s traditional manufacturing and other blue-collar labor jobs have been replaced by an ever-burgeoning service industry, thereby producing underemployment (including part-time and temporary work) that is now accepted as a by-product of a supposedly “leaner” economic landscape (Gordon 1996; Parker 1994; Harvey 1989). Labor unions have suffered serious setbacks, especially during the Reagan administration, and continue to face a significantly “hostile” political environment (Hall 1996). Additionally the 1980s and 1990s were marked by an unprecedented increase in income disparity. Economic analysts contend that 39.3% of America’s wealth is now owned by one-half percent of the American population. The wealthiest 20% of households own nearly 85% of the nation’s total wealth (Center for Budget and Policy Priorities 2001).

Workers and their families have felt the brunt of these changes. In the past 20 years, Americans have added 335 hours a year to their workload - 350 hours a year more than Europeans and 70 hours more than the Japanese (Intelligence Report 1999). Along with added hours, workers made less in “real” wages. According to Gordon (1996) over the past two decades, “real hourly take-home pay for production and non-supervisory workers-representing more than 80 percent of all wage-and-salary employees-has declined by more

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than 10 percent” (4). While workers faced an erosion of wages and a tenuous employment landscape, children increasingly found themselves victimized by this “leaner” economy as child poverty rates have soared since the early 1970s. In fact, between 1973 and 1994 the poverty rate for all children in young families more than doubled (Epstein 1999). In 1999, among children 18 and under, 19% lived below the “official poverty line” - the highest rate in the “developed” world (Intelligence Report 1999). While minorities continue to be disproportionately affected by economic troubles, the white middle-class and working-class have been deeply affected by these economic transformations as well (Gordon 1996).

The uncertainty that marks adolescence is heightened during an age of economic insecurity. When young people face bleak economic prospects, hopelessness, frustration, and anger are some responses. Skinheads, as well as other sectors of the white power movement are influenced by the “booms and busts” of our economic system, and many of these racist activists indeed cite frustrations and concerns with the economy as one of the reasons that led to their involvement with “the movement” (Dobratz and Shanks-Meile 1997).

Along with economic transformations, the U.S. has been shaken by a number of other important political changes. Post World War II America witnessed the powerful expansion of the Civil Rights Movement and other ethnic pride movements, the emergence of the second wave of the U.S. Feminist Movement, the Anti-War and Student Movements, the Environmental Movement, the Gay and Lesbian Movement, and many others that actively challenged the status quo and demand fair and equal treatment. Major legal and political reforms occurred during this period which was also marked by the beginning and end of the Vietnam War, and the resignation of a President over something called Watergate.

In recent years many other emotionally charged social and political issues have captured America’s attention including: “family breakdown,” “urban decay,” a panic-ridden fear of crime (especially minority street gangs), growth in international and increasingly domestic terrorism, “assault” on the right to bear arms, “illegal” and legal immigration,
affirmative action, abortion, and the “crisis” surrounding traditional notions of masculinity that is evidenced by the growing popularity of narratives that instruct males to re-inscribe “male supremacy” through hyper-masculine attitudes and practices (Gibson 1994).

By the end of the 1960s, with the assassinations of John Fitzgerald Kennedy, Malcolm X, Robert Fitzgerald Kennedy, and Martin Luther King Jr., America was reeling from an optimism turned sour and rocked by race riots across the country. At the dawn of the 1980s, the social and political climate had increasingly turned hostile as the “Reagan Revolution” began to sweep the nation. Faludi (1991), for example, comments that, “by the mid 1980s as resistance to women’s rights acquired political and social acceptability it passed into the popular culture” (Faludi 1991: xix). Further, frustration with welfare “handouts” grew as Reagan and others called for a crackdown on “welfare queens” and others who were undeserving and irresponsible (Faludi 1991). During the 1980s, the general populace began referring to Lyndon Johnson’s “Great Society” as the “great failure,” culminating in the shift to dismantle much of the existing social safety net. The rising American intolerance that marked the 1980s continued into the 1990s as a number of anti-gay, anti-affirmative action, and anti-immigration initiatives were met with a significant amount of electoral success (Feagin and Vera 1995).

The last couple of decades have seen a growing resentment; lack of trust and an overall dissatisfaction with the U.S. government, illustrating what Habermas (1975) has called the “legitimation crisis” (Habermas 1975). Anti-tax sentiments and a “throw the rascals out” perspective in the general populace paralleled much of the rage found among skinheads whose emergence seems to articulate, above all else, discontent with the status quo. There is a growing perception among the American populace that current transformations are a clear indication that the “real” America is only a faded memory, and that having lost their sovereignty, U.S. citizens are quickly becoming prisoners in a country no longer their own (Gibson 1994).
The Precedence of Racial Conflict in Southern California

My choice of geographic area for the study of a racist youth subculture is partly motivated by the severe racial conflicts that have occurred in Southern California. During the 1920s and 1930s, the Ku Klux Klan used area suburbs as a "happy hunting ground" (Chalmers 1976: 34) to keep out the "unwanted," while in 1950s and 1960s an ardent white supremacist chief of police helped maintain the racial status quo (Davis 1990). In addition, a history of residential and school segregation, race riots, and minority street gangs makes the study of a racist youth subculture in Southern California that much more compelling.

The sprawling suburban metropolis known as Los Angeles, where more than 14.5 million people reside (U.S. Census Bureau 1990) was at one time a "back country town" (Davis 1990: 25). The early development of southwestern California reads a little like a soap opera filled with intrigue, conspiracy and plenty of skeletons in the closet (Reisner 1993; Walton 1992; Davis 1997, 1990; Fogelson 1967). As late as 1880, Los Angeles had yet to begin its unending sprawl across the western desert (the 187th largest in the 1880 census) (Davis 1990). Less than four decades later Los Angeles was the largest city in the west, with a population close to a million. The growth spurt resulted from the importation of water, a federally subsidized harbor, oil discovery, and aggressive real estate development (Davis 1990). With Hollywood making Los Angeles "probably the most mediated town in America, nearly unviewable save through the fictive script of its mythologizers" (Sorkin 1982: 8) and simultaneously erecting Los Angeles as our nation's "cultural capital," it was the development of a large-scale industrial sector that guaranteed Los Angeles' place among metropolitan giants (Soja 1995).

The history of Los Angeles has been fundamentally shaped by the jagged edges of race, leaving some to even use the metaphor of fire to explain the role race has played within this geographic context: "it's the fire of race, and it is still burning. The fifth fire has
in fact burned from the beginning of California’s recorded history...” (Wyatt 1997: 2).
However, we should resist seeing Los Angeles as an American anomaly, but instead as a microcosm—a reflection of America’s deepest dreams, fears, desires, angers, frustrations, and fantasies.

During the 1860s and 1870s, Los Angeles stood out from the already lawless and violent west, as racial terrorism and lynching were taken to new heights (Davis 1990). During this period, Hispanics and Asians were the most likely targets, as white Angelinos enforced puritanical and rigid racial priorities. A few decades later, the region would be marked by the presence of organized vigilantes known as the Ku Klux Klan (Chalmers 1976). During the 1920s, the Klan was readily aided by local communities as part of the efforts to drive blacks out of residential areas (Bass 1960). Less that half-a-century later, another set of white vigilantes, sporting shaved heads would continue to roam the streets of Los Angeles, defending racial territories.

One can also detect a clear white hostility toward the presence of “non-whites” by looking at Los Angeles’ history of legislative decrees. In 1912, “the Shank Rule” (enacted by city attorney John Shank) permitted saloons to charge blacks more money than whites for a glass of beer (Laslett 1996). By 1917, white Angelinos had established an official system of segregation with the use of housing covenants, and in 1929, this system received legal sanction from the California State Supreme Court who upheld a restrictive covenant in L.A. to “keep West Slauson Avenue white” (Bass 1960). In fact, until the Supreme Court’s 1948 decision against restrictive covenants and the 1950 repeal of California’s Alien Land Law, segregation was legally endorsed throughout the state (and the country for that matter).

In addition to the efforts of groups like the Klan in the 1920s and 1930s, white racism found an even more powerful proponent in the 1950s and 1960s: the Los Angeles Police Chief (Davis 1990). A bastion of white supremacy, the LAPD was under the leadership of Chief William Parker who worked diligently to enforce his campaign against “race-mixing”
(Spalding 1973). This campaign included nothing less than blockading the premier R&B record store, barring white customers and telling them that “it was too dangerous to hang around black neighborhoods” (Spalding 1973:7). In April of 1962, the LAPD attacked a Nation of Islam Mosque killing one person and wounding six more, which served as an important catalyst to the Watts “Rebellion/Riot” of 1965 (Davis 1990). In addition, the notorious Chief Parker consistently went “on-record” demonstrating without doubt the full extent of his racial views. Consider the following comments made during testimony before the US Commission on Civil Rights in 1960:

...Parker characterized the LAPD as the real ‘embattled minority’ and
....the tensions between L.A.’s minority communities and the cops had
simply to do with the fact that Blacks and Latinos were statistically many
times more likely than whites to commit crimes...explaining that the people
who lived there [in East Los Angeles] were only one step removed from ‘the
wild tribes of Mexico.’ (quoted in Davis 1990: P. 295)

or his comments to a 1965 television audience:

It is estimated that by 1970 45% of the metropolitan area of Los Angeles
will be Negro; if you want any protection for your home and family...you're
going to have to get in and support a strong police department. If you don’t

We should not be surprised that, within twenty years, groups of white youths envisioning
themselves as the real “embattled minorities” would organize in order to battle the incursion of “non-white” immigrants and “minority” street gangs.

The startling practices of the LAPD should not be viewed in isolation from the larger white community’s antipathy toward blacks and Hispanics. This large-scale “white resistance” was clearly articulated in 1964 by the 75 per cent white vote for Proposition 14 which sought to repeal the Rumford Fair Housing Act (Davis 1990). This proposition effectively dismantled attempts at ending residential segregation. Following the Supreme
Court's hallmark decision in 1954, as the desegregation of schools became a major issue across the United States, one of the eventual stumbling blocks to desegregation plans (eventually known as "busing") ripped at the seams of many our nation's towns and cities. While Boston is one of the most well known cases, a number of other cities also faced this issue. As a case in point, Los Angeles experienced a significant amount of conflict surrounding plans to desegregate public schools through the implementation of busing programs.

In 1978, following a fifteen-year legal battle, the courts ordered the Los Angeles School District to begin busing in order to achieve racial balance. A year later, after heated conflicts including a boycott initiated by parents in the L.A. School District, Judge Egly endorsed a limited version of busing for the Los Angeles School District (Los Angeles Times 1/21/79). In this version, most of the busing was scheduled to take place between South-Central Los Angeles and the Valley, excluding Westside schools that had already sponsored token integration.

In 1979, however, the court also began hearing testimony on a metropolitan school integration plan that would have mandated busing throughout the entirety of Los Angeles County, as well as parts of Orange and Ventura counties. Eventually, anti-busing activists and a sudden switch by the Democratic Party establishment which reversed its position on the busing issue squashed this proposal. Even with anti-busing victories, white flight continued to the "outer valley" as white Angelinos attempted to create a fantasy of suburban serenity. This flight was not only spurred by the desire to escape the pollution and traffic, but also street gangs and street crime. In fact, a survey of Santa Clarita's residents by its developer, the Newhall Land Company, found that one of the primary reasons for moving to Santa Clarita was "...escaping the L.A. school system...." [that was considered to be a seedbed for street gangs and crime] (quoted in Davis 1990: P. 185)
L.A.: A State of Change

No other city in America may have experienced such great and rapid social change as Los Angeles over the last three decades (Waldinger and Bozorgmehr 1996). In 1965, Congress approved the Hart-Celler Act revising the U.S.'s nativist-inspired immigration policies which limited non-European immigration. Unlike the early part of the 20th century when most immigrants originated from eastern and southern Europe, beginning in the 1970s and 1980s, the majority of immigrants arrived from Mexico, Central and South America, the Caribbean, the Middle East, and Asia (Waldinger 1996).

These demographic changes in immigration patterns were mirrored in Los Angeles that, for most of its history, had attracted white and "native-born" migrants. In 1920, toward the end of the last "great migration," only 17% of Angelinos were born abroad, compared to 35% in New York City. However, by 1990, 33% of those living in Los Angeles County were foreign-bom immigrants. In addition to the wave of "authorized" immigrants, unauthorized migration also increased by more than 50% between 1980-1992 (Waldinger and Bozorgmehr 1996). Like the reaction to busing, many "native" white Angelinos reacted with great disdain to the changing demographic landscape of southern California by deserting Los Angeles for greener (or whiter) pastures.

Over the last two decades, as "pro-American" sentiments have run at an almost feverish pitch, "non-white" residents have increasingly found themselves targets of anger, frustration and violence across the nation (Feagin and Vera 1995). Violent crime, including rioting, looting and street gangs, we are told, is a problem of disenfranchised minority communities. In addition to producing significant levels of inter-group fear, these stereotypes also produce immense resentment and blame. Too many white youths learn that crime is a "black problem" (Feagin and Vera 1995; Wellman 1993) and while most of these youths are only mildly influenced by these stereotypes, some carry them to a logical conclusion: "If blacks and other nonwhites are the gangbangers, the rapists and the murderers, then shouldn't we do something about it?" However, few people are willing to have open
dialogues when these questions are posed, and youths who express these sentiments often find themselves marginalized for holding what seem like perfectly logical views. Instead, complex depictions of racism are exchanged for overly simplistic ones, leaving many youth without the tutoring necessary to critically understand these issues.

In spite of much of the right-wing reactionary success during the 1980s and 1990s, the winds have changed in matters of open expressions of racism. No longer “politically correct,” much of contemporary America has either embraced the rhetoric of the “color-blind” society or multiculturalism (Gilroy 2001). Even conservatives, who do not typically subscribe to multiculturalism, find themselves opting for “coded speech” (e.g. welfare queen), paying lip service to the ideals of an “inclusive society” (Bell 2001). Without a doubt some people interpret these subtle, yet dramatic changes as some kind of “hidden agenda,” unsure about the existing normative guidelines. Skinheads came of age during this turbulent period and were the first generation to experience these significant cultural, economic, political and demographic shifts.

The Organization of the Study

Chapters 1, 2 and 3 provide a historical context for the topic, a review of the street gang and social movement literature, and the methodological design, while chapters 4, 5, and 6 discuss the three specific phases of the skinhead subculture that I identified. In one sense, chapters 4, 5, and 6 are unique stories that “stand alone,” but they are also interconnected, and, taken together, illustrate the unfolding of an important, yet often overlooked social process: how the career of gang subcultures develop. In each chapter, I argue that to understand this process, we must remain attentive to the diverse strands that constitute gang subcultures and avoid overestimating homogeneity.

In chapter four, I discuss the first phase of the skinhead subculture and their genesis toward social gangs. The first phase began around 1978, lasted until about 1984, and was initially characterized by stylistic experimentation. Stylistic innovation was quickly trans-
formed into social gangs built around shared organizational names, ritual initiation rites (e.g. jump-ins), fraternal relations, semi-hierarchical social roles, and non-specialized, "garden-variety" delinquency (e.g. vandalism, under-age drinking, petty theft). At first, race was only episodically important, as skinheads held a range of racial views.

In chapter five, I examine the second phase, the transition to political gangs, which occurred between 1984 and 1994 as skinhead identity became increasingly anchored in race. During this phase, shifting internal dynamics and budding relationships between skinhead gangs and factions of the white supremacist movement (e.g. the White Aryan Resistance [WAR]) helped mobilize racism from episodic expressions into a dominant discourse. Part of what helped structure skinhead racism was their participation in white supremacist political activism.

Yet, the move toward politicization is meant to describe a general shift in skinhead subculture and it is not intended to describe a wholesale change that some researchers have implied (e.g. Hamm 1993; Moore 1993). Not all skinhead gangs embraced a political stance. There were outlying currents that embraced strident racism, but not political activism. Others splintered and formed anti-racist gangs. Still others were ambiguous about race, favoring a "pro-American" ultra-nationalistic stance that often included racism, but veered away from the trend toward neo-Nazism. Despite these outlying currents, the period between 1984 and 1994 was most noted for an organizational growth surrounding politicized skinhead gangs.

In chapter six, I present the third and most recent phase in the skinhead subculture: economic gangs. The time-period of this phase is the hardest to specify, but by the late 1990s, a clear shift of emphasis toward economic gangs was evident. Economic gangs combine aspects of both social and political gangs. Although they are racist, their primary interests surround profit-oriented criminal activity. I examine the change toward an economic emphasis by discussing three facilitating factors. Throughout this study, I argue that changes in the skinhead subculture have neither progressed in a continuous direction nor
has it ever been completely dominated by one particular emphasis (although, as I argue distinct developmental phases are apparent). There are distinct phases, but we should not confuse this with the assumption that all skinhead gangs fit neatly into the same category. During each of the phases I identify, diversity remains a prominent characteristic. It is my goal to explain why and how these phases occurred and the implications for the future of skinhead subculture and, more generally, the implications for how we understand subcultural change.

In chapter 7, I conclude by presenting a discussion about the future of skinheads in southern California. I also discuss how the skinhead case improves our theoretical understanding of gang subcultures, social movements, and racism.
Notes

1 Not all skinheads are racist as there are various different types of skinheads. I use the generic term skinhead to refer to racist skinheads.

2 The Los Angeles area is a five-county region that includes Los Angeles, Orange, Ventura, Riverside, and San Bernardino Counties (Waldinger and Bozorgmehr 1996). To avoid repetition, I use the term Southern California interchangeably with Los Angeles.

3 The ZOG discourse is informed by an older anti-Semitic discourse rooted in texts such as the Protocols of the Elders of Zion and then later in the United States by publications such as Henry Ford's the International Jew. The success of the ZOG discourse signaled a change in the direction of ideological dissemination with America moving from importer to exporter of extreme right ideology.

4 There is already ample efforts that examine the morality of skinhead ideology and practices such as bias-motivated violence, however, what is generally lacking are reasoned attempts to understand the emergence and development of skinheads.

5 In Europe, scholars have been much quicker to take skinheads seriously and begin studying the various facets of the phenomena including processual factors (Bjorgo 1998, 1997; Fangen 1998; Loow 1993; Heitmeyer 1993).

6 This problem is also true for gang research and criminological theory (Sampson 2001).

7 A number of scholars have noted the transition from overt racism to a more “polite” everyday, hidden racism (c.f. Feagin and Sykes 1994; Feagin and Vera 1995; Back and Solomon 2001). However, this transition may be more apparent than real.
LITERATURE REVIEW

I use insights derived from the study of gangs, collective behavior and social movements to examine the development of the skinhead subculture. Although I draw primarily from the street gang literature, I also view concepts related to collective behavior and social movements as effective and complementary tools that can improve our understanding of gangs. Gang scholars have typically ignored dynamism and heterogeneity in gang subcultures, while the scholarship in collective behavior and social movements has been sensitive to the relationship between organizational formation, shared identities, and social change.

Defining Gangs

Defining gangs is a difficult task. Arguably, the most significant obstacle to developing a consistent definition of gangs is the question of whether to include criminal activity as a dimension. Proponents of including crime argue that excluding this variable encourages definitions which are too broad and unable to distinguish between benign “play groups” and street gangs (Klein 1995). Those who favor exclusion argue that if criminal activity is part of the definitional criteria then measuring the level of crime becomes problematic as it is being used as both an independent and dependent variable (Short 1996a).

I define gangs as a group of individuals bound together by common interests (some of which are criminal), initiation rites, fraternal relations, and a symbolic collective marker (i.e. gang name and individual nicknames). Gangs are also a type of social organization, but the degree of organization (especially formality) varies greatly from one gang to an-
other. Separate gang cliques that reside in the same locale, share important characteristics (e.g. race or ethnicity), or generally identify themselves as part of the same gang “family” constitutes a gang subculture. Therefore, gangs are a special type of subculture, considering that many subcultures are primarily organized around leisure (e.g. basket weavers) and have neither an explicit connection to crime nor politics. I view skinheads as forming a network of gangs as opposed to a “social movement” or “terrorists”. The concept of gang captures the skinheads’ non-political, local and autonomous origins. Further, the gang concept also allows researchers to measure the process that led some skinheads to embrace a political orientation as well as the process that led others to drift toward organized criminal activity because it does not presuppose a particular orientation.

My approach is designed to determine the career of the skinhead subculture. Goffman (1961:127-28) refers to careers as “the regular sequence of changes...[which] refer to any social strand of any person’s course through life.” Becker (1963:24) argues that the career concept “refers to the sequence of movements from one position to another in an occupational system...” Becker also claims that “the model can be easily be transformed for use in the study of deviant careers...” (1963: 24). Similarly, I argue that the career concept can provide important analytic purchase towards the understanding not only of deviant individuals, but also deviant subcultures. Yet, while the career concept has been used widely to examine the individual trajectories of criminals and other “deviant types,” (Sampson and Laub 1993; Sampson and Lauritsen 1993; Luckenbill and Best 1981), there has been little effort to apply this concept to the changes that occur in gang subcultures (Short 1996b).

Like the gang concept, subculture has been defined in a number of different ways. Borrowing from Fine and Kleinman’s (1979) interactionist approach to subculture, I will also approach subcultures as a network of interlocking groups with varying degrees of overlap that provide a common discourse and serve to define the spatial and ideational boundaries that distinguish “in group/out group.” The skinheads are a network of gangs which taken together constitute a subculture. Contrary to some depictions that tend to
view subcultures as static entities, Fine and Kleinman argue they are best viewed as creative social forms that are organized around negotiation and the spread of cultural information and practices (1979). Some versions of subcultural theory (c.f. Hebdige 1979) assume a distinction between the “authentic originals” of a subculture and “hangers-on” (Wei-Teng Leong 1992; Clarke 1981). This distinction implies that subcultures are closed entities, preventing the consideration of processual factors related to affiliation and disaffiliation and the back-and-forth interplay between these processes. Further, a closed view of subcultures ignores the varying degrees of commitment and participation in subcultural formations. The image developed is one of static and homogeneous subcultures where membership and non-membership is clearly distinct.

Gang Theories

Traditionally, gangs have been seen as a response among the poor and new immigrants who struggle to survive within a context of an urbanizing “zone of transition” (Thrasher 1927) and then more recently in de-industrialized areas facing persistent and pervasive poverty (Moore 1991, 1978; Hagedorn 1988; Vigil 1988). In between Thrasher’s “ecological” approach of the 1920s and the “underclass” thesis of the 1980s, several important theoretical developments occurred during the 1950s and 1960s. Albert Cohen (1955) stressed that gangs were comprised of lower class youths blocked from status within the larger society and explained them as collectivities: “actors to which individual human beings or ‘natural persons’ are related as ‘members’ ” (Cohen 1955: 9). Membership in these collectivities provided “subcultural solutions to status problems” by creating opportunities to achieve the status denied to them by the larger society (Cohen 1955: 65). While Cohen stressed the importance of non-utilitarian cultural goals, two other important gang researchers of that era, Cloward and Ohlin (1960), emphasized the role of utilitarian economic goals as well. From their perspective, limited economic opportunity structures were the catalyst for the formation of youth gangs. Reflecting their structural-functionalist
framework, Cohen and Cloward and Ohlin assumed that a larger cultural consensus regarding values existed and in contrast, Miller (1958) saw gang youths as enacting a set of normal lower-class values or "focal concerns" that reflected their social milieu. Gangs were not reacting against a middle class "measuring rod," but exaggerated the lower class emphasis on excitement, trouble, toughness, autonomy, and fate (Miller 1958: 261-62). Most of these theorists assumed that gangs were a lower-class phenomenon and that gang culture was unchanging and highly durable over time, and these assumptions had a tremendous influence on how researchers continue to view gangs.

Diversity and Change within Gangs

We know a great deal about the relationship between gangs and criminal behavior and the prevalence of gang participation; however we know much less about how and why gang subcultures change over time (Moore 1991; Short 1996b). While a number of gang typologies exist (Sanchez-Jankowski 1991; Fagan 1990; Cohen 1955; Cloward and Ohlin 1960; Thrasher 1927), less attention has been given to the diversity existent within a gang subculture. The few exceptions to these omissions discuss how the profitability surrounding the drug-trade has transformed gangs, creating an economic emphasis and greater levels of violence (see Venkatesh 2000; Brotherton 1999; Schneider 1999; Padilla 1992; Moore 1991). Overall, the issues of change and diversity remain under-studied and as Short (2003: np) notes, "changes in gang subcultures have not been well documented and a greater number of studies are needed".

A paucity of longitudinal studies and subcultural theories emphasizing the unchanging and closed nature of these groupings has perpetuated the perception of gang subcultures as static and homogeneous (Moore 1994). As Sanchez-Jankowski (1991) has argued, "a large number of studies have used gangs as an independent variable to explain crime and delinquency patterns and thus focused more on the consequences of gang actions rather than the internal structure and the social dynamics of the organization itself" (327). Similarly,
Hagedorn (1988) notes that most current research no longer focuses on how gangs arise within a particular community context and how they function within those social environments; instead, the fundamental question has become, 'why are gang members delinquent'? These arguments bear resemblance to Sampson's (2000) recent critique of the broader area of criminological theory where he advocates that researchers employ greater sensitivity to the significant changes that occur during an individuals' life course. I would add that we should be equally sensitive to the changes that occur within a subculture over the course of time.

Moore (1991) indicates, "what anybody 'knows' about a gang in any given year—even a gang member's knowledge—may in certain specifics be out of date the very next year." Klein (1995, 1971) claims that gangs have always been more diverse than portrayed by either the media or the limited academic studies of this issue. Short (1996a: xiv) contends that, “little scholarly attention has been devoted to how these diverse and changing collective forms of youth organization and behavior relate to one another.” Ignoring these processes leads to a view of gangs as static and homogeneous (Moore 1994) and reflect our disciplinary bias toward discovering "likeness" and persistent patterns over time. While valuable, these works may also restrict our awareness of diversity and dynamism within social phenomena. On the other hand, acknowledging that gangs change is only the first step in explaining how and why these changes occurred, which is precisely the goal of my study.

Gang researchers have been especially neglectful of how street gangs become politicized (Brotherton 1999). If, as Moore (1978: 36) argues gangs are “symbolic challenges to the world,” then why do some gangs translate symbolic challenges into material practices intended to produce social change? My proposal to analyze the political dimensions of gangs does not hinge upon a romanticized notion of gangs or the process of politicization. Instead, I view politicization as one of many possible phases in the career of a gang subculture. To understand politicization we should neither treat gang transformation as inherently positive nor treat gang members as “political heroes”. Some researchers concluded
that earlier gangs, despite rhetoric to the contrary, were simply not well organized and did not constitute a group seeking large-scale change (Short and Strodtbeck 1976; Klein 1971). However, there is evidence that some important exceptions to these claims exist. For example, in the late 1960s several local African-American gangs helped form Los Angeles' first chapter of the Black Panthers who professed a revolutionary agenda (Davis 1990). Former members of the Black Liberation Army, a revolutionary Black Nationalist organization, formed the Black Guerrilla Family, the largest African-American prison gang in California. (Parenti 2002). Another gang who temporarily evolved into a political organization during the late 1960s was Chicago's largest street gang, the Vice Lords (Dawley 1992). These exceptions suggest that street gangs possess a wide-range of variations in group formation and structure, from a-political to revolutionary and from rightwing to leftwing can be found among gangs (Knox 2000).

To understand the process of gang politicization, I borrow concepts from the social movements scholarship. Social movements are defined as a "collectivity acting with some degree of organization and continuity outside of institutional channels for the purpose of promoting or resisting change in the group, society, or world order of which it is a part" (Snow and McAdam 1998: xviii). Social movements depend upon subcultures to provide a base of participants and spaces where activists can learn movement beliefs, rituals, and build ties with other participants. The process by which subcultures are dynamically affected by social forces in terms of shifting attitudes and increasing involvement in political activity is politicization (Langton 1969). A key element in politicization is the building of collective identity, which Taylor and Whittier (1992: 105) define as "the shared definition of the group that derives from members' common interests, experiences, and solidarity." Recent efforts in the area of social movements have emphasized that creating and sustaining a collective identity is a cultural accomplishment (Melucci 1996, 1989; Taylor and Whittier 1992). For example, Melucci (1989: 73-74) suggests that we re-think, "an exclusively political view centered on the instrumental dimension of action." That gangs often
crumble as quickly as they form underscores the importance of creating collective identity. The failure to create a collective identity leaves participants without the glue necessary to bind them together. Although Albert Cohen (1955) stressed that gangs are above all else “collectivities” more than five decades ago, neither he nor others have emphasized the subcultural career trajectories that develop over time. Participants in gangs may be influenced by factors like “status frustration,” “blocked opportunity,” and a breakdown of “social control,” but once involved group processes channel individual participants in particular directions which in turn affects organizational emphases.

The Skinhead Literature

While some have viewed skinheads as a “delinquent subculture” characterized by fluid membership, drug use, unstable leadership, and inter-gang rivalries (Blazak 2001; Blazak and Wooden 2001; Etter 1999; McCurrie 1998; Baron 1997; Christensen 1994), skinheads have been largely excluded from the conceptual framework of gangs. For example, Hamm (1993) argues that it is a conceptual mistake to view skinheads as street gangs and instead urges that we view them as an “international terrorist youth subculture” in light of their ideological perspectives, overt racism, political violence, and international connections. However, Hamm fails to develop his conceptual framework. In a similar vein, Klein (1995) excludes skinheads from his examination of street gangs because:

compared to street gangs which spend significant amounts of time “hanging out” on the streets, skinheads are “inside; they’re working on their materials; or if outside, they’re looking for a target, not just lounging around...skinheads are focused, always planning...Skins prefer narrower ranges of trouble. (P. 22)

Similarly, Moore (1993) argues that skinheads are ordinarily informally structured, unlike more disciplined street gangs with their Mafia-like positions of power and specific function, they tend not
to have clearly identifiable leaders who develop specific plans of action to be performed by a regulated skinhead membership. Skinhead groups are often gangs only in the very loosest sense, and often seem more a collection of individuals who frequently congregate with each other at some hangout not exclusively theirs but at which they can display some unity and fraternity.... (P. 75)

These arguments ignore that significant difference (e.g. racial/ethnic and regional) exist between all gangs. Klein's assumption that skinheads have greater focus is unfounded and implies that skinheads constitute a homogenous subculture, while Moore's statement that gangs have highly structured organizations flies in the face of decades of gang research that suggests otherwise (Klein 1995; Moore 1991; Vigil 1988; Short and Strodbeck 1976). Rather than trying to portray skinheads as highly focused or completely unorganized, I propose that there is great diversity existing among racist skinheads. I consider the skinheads as typically forming gangs immersed within a network that, in varying degrees, emphasizes a racist ideology.

Social scientists have been slow to study skinheads. Although informative and useful, much of the available research is produced by journalists (e.g. Cooper 1989; Coplon 1988), special interest groups (Anti-Defamation League, Southern Poverty Law Center) and law enforcement (Etter 1999; McCurrie 1998; Christenson 1994). Findings from the small amount of academic literature often seem contradictory (Blazak 2001; Blazak and Wooden 2001; Hamm 1993; Moore 1993). For example, Blazak and Wooden claim that youths who become racist skinheads experience high levels of alienation, a finding not supported by Hamm (1993) who found little alienation among the skinheads he studied. Earlier academic studies of the British skinheads (Brake 1985; Hebdige 1979; Clark 1976) tended to focus exclusively upon style which they explained as an attempt to resolve a marginal working-class status in a class-based society (Baron 1997). I agree with Dobratz and Shanks-Meile (1997) when they contend that further research is needed to better under-
stand the skinhead phenomena, and draw more definitive conclusions. I also agree with Spergel's (1995: 66) assessment that "skinhead group structure and style fit the gang pattern: a gang name, colors, tattooing, distinctive dress, drug use, and criminal behavior".

Hamm's (1993) *American Skinheads* is typically credited as the most thorough account of this phenomenon. Hamm's primary purpose was to examine the origins of the American skinheads and to empirically test various criminological theories to assess their applicability to the skinheads. Hamm's research is a good starting point for a historical account, but because he focuses upon the entire nation, local nuances are not examined. Hamm also relies upon secondary sources produced by agencies that are neither historians nor social scientists; and although reports from these "fact finders" are extremely useful, they are subject to agency contamination (Baron 1997). Further, Hamm's secondary sources are limited to watchdog organizations, as he did not access data from law enforcement agencies. Finally, his interviews with skinheads approximated survey questionnaires and thus were not well suited for eliciting historical data.

Three other studies on skinheads are also noteworthy. The first is Randy Blazak and Wayne Wooden's work in *Renegade Kids, Suburban Outlaws* (2001), which draws from Albert Cohen (1955) and more recently Robert Agnew's (1985) research on juvenile delinquency. Blazak and Wooden argue that skinheads are a product of "status frustration" where "hostility expressed by these skinheads is a reflection of their anomie...status frustration was manipulated by right-wing groups who explained to teens why their father's factory was closed down, why feminists had so much power, why their suburban school was becoming 'less white'..." (152-53). According to this research, individuals experiencing this kind of alienation are able to find comfort in a collective that provides a medium and scapegoats to express rage and indignation at decreasing prospects for the future. However, status frustrations do not completely explain subcultural development and changing organizational emphases.
Using secondary sources and some primary interviews conducted with skinheads, Moore's (1993) *Skinheads Shaved for Battle: A Cultural History of American Skinheads* traces the origins of skinheads in the U.S., and seeks to describe and assess the components of skinhead culture. He explores the relationship between the punk and skinhead subculture, the role of violence, and growing affiliations with larger white supremacist organizations. Although Moore's account is informative, it suffers from several weaknesses. It is completely unclear how Moore selected his sources of data and how much was gathered for analysis. Further, Moore tends to assume characteristics such as violence, and as a result, sheds little light on how these characteristics developed over time. His account dismisses the nuance between “white pride” and “white power,” attributing this distinction to an effort by skinheads to “counter-attack expectations of them through offering counter-images, embracing the more acceptable sounding white pride instead of white power....” (P. 16) Accordingly, his interpretation neglects the very real distinctions that skinheads themselves draw between differing levels of racism. At the same time, Moore (1993) also notices that skinheads became increasingly political during the late 1980s:

skinheads were being actively courted and recruited by extremist hate groups... Some skinheads themselves began for the first time actively recruiting new members from the ranks of high school students...to join at least organized cadres supporting a specific political agenda....” (Pp. 14-15)

Although I largely agree with Moore’s contention, his discussion tells us little about the specific process that led to these changes. Discussing the skinhead transition toward politics without analyzing the mechanisms that generated it leads one to assume that this transition was somehow inevitable.

Lastly, Anderson (2001) provides an ethnographic account of the San Francisco Skinheads. Based upon the fieldwork he conducted during the summer of 1985, Anderson analyzes how a local collection of U.S. youths adapted a foreign British subcultural style. Although Anderson's findings are severely limited due to the short length of time in the
field (3 months), his approach allows us to begin assessing the processes of emulation, diffusion and domestic adaptations resulting from the significant gaps of culture and space between British and U.S. skinheads. For example, Anderson describes the San Francisco Skins composing marching chants with slogans such as “Hail Reagan” as opposed to British skinheads who were known to shout “Hail National Front”.

Research examining U.S. skinheads is primarily cross-sectional and discussions of the historical emergence of skinheads have focused on the national level. These cross-sectional and macro-level approaches are unable to assess changes over time and restrict the depth of analysis, leaving local differences within the subculture unexplored. In contrast, I study the origin of racist skinheads in a specific locale, using an in-depth case study approach in order to identify how and why the skinhead subculture changes over time and the continuous presence of subcultural diversity.

Typically, skinhead research has tacitly assumed that racist skinheads are a homogenous population who remain constant over time and differ little from group-to-group. These studies assume the presence of racism and violence rather than analyzing these characteristics as cultural resources that arise through the course of interactive and organizational processes. Further, little effort has been invested in studying skinheads as engaging in “meaning-work,” struggling over the production of ideas and meanings. It is much easier to simply cast skinheads as “boneheads” or “idiots with ideology” than it is to treat them as serious actors with sincere ideological convictions (as distasteful as they may be). I argue that the racist skinhead phenomenon has undergone a number of important alterations in its relatively short history, and that such alterations attest to interpretive or “ideological work” (Berger 1982) where actors amplify and extend current meanings; transform old meanings; and generate new meanings (Snow and Benford 1992). In a recent article analyzing the “non-racist” and “indigenous” origins of the skinheads, Wood (1999) argues that typical accounts of the emergence of the skinhead subculture tend to ignore the diversity existing within the subculture by overemphasizing skinhead racism. Similarly, I argue that
not only is there a great deal of diversity within the entire skinhead subculture, but that even among racist skinheads there is significant variation, a point which is also typically overlooked by academic research.

Historical accounts of skinheads tend to either ignore the indigenous cultural basis which helped spawn this “foreign” style (Wood 1999) or fail to offer an in-depth analysis of how indigenous sources led to the mobilization of episodic racism existent within the punk and early skinhead subculture and created an identity anchored in a racist worldview. Some accounts claim that a few “idiots with ideology” (Hamm 1993) in San Francisco were one of the first skinhead gangs to emerge in the U.S. However, there is little attempt to explain where these “idiots” came from or what types of prior affiliations led these youths to develop the San Francisco Skins. In other words, what is the subcultural milieu from which skinheads emerged? Other treatments (Wood 1999) tend to dichotomize skinheads as “non-racist” and “racist,” treating racism as a static unchanging phenomenon. This type of approach makes it difficult to assess how and why skinhead racism changes over time. Further, treating racism as one-dimensional ignores the variance of racial ideology within the same individual, group and subculture.

The existence of skinhead racism cannot be assumed as much of the literature does. Some observers claim that American skinheads were already racist when they embraced the skinhead style (Moore 1993). As Moore argues, “many Americans in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and not all of them young, thought and behaved like skinheads though they did not adopt the skinhead style...” (Moore 1993: P. 71). While this may be true, this conception leads to a static view of skinhead racism, treating it as a constant in no need of further explanation. Moore ignores the continual changes and shifts that occur within a subculture even one marked by open racism. We need to know more than the truism that racist skinheads are racist; we need to know how consistent racism is among skinhead gangs? Although some subcultural participants may enter as racists, racism will not necessarily constitute the overriding or binding characteristic of that particular gang or the
subculture as a whole. Other factors (e.g. specific organizational interests, etc) mediate how influential these sentiments will be. To answer questions of shifting subcultural emphases, I trace the generation of these characteristics back to specific gangs and their early roots as well as the diffusion that took place over time. If skinhead gangs shift over time, what are the themes that are continuous and discontinuous? Skinheads form a distinct subculture with specific "focal concerns," yet not all participants experience this unity in the same way or to the same degree. Instead, skinheads are a subculture composed of a patchwork of different factions, which emphasize some interests and concerns more than others.

Conceptual Roadmap

My framework for understanding the skinhead subculture is inspired by prior sociological studies of gangs (see Schneider 1999; Padilla 1992; Moore 1991; Hagedorn 1988). Since their birth, skinhead gangs have moved through three phases which are characterized by different organizational emphases (social, political, and economic). These phases are dynamic and complex making them difficult to describe. On one hand, skinhead gangs noticeably changed through the successive phases that I describe. On the other hand, not all gangs followed the same pattern in the same way. Some clearly shifted to the next organizational phase, others retained much of the prior organizational focus, and others moved back and forth between the two. My aim is to capture this dynamism, especially the ebb and flow of groups into and out of the successive phases of subcultural change. To understand this process, I am sensitive to the multiplicity of gang types that co-exist and sometimes co-mingle as well as the multiple directions that can occur within gang development. These phases are neither neat nor homogeneous developments that result from subcultural consensus. Instead, internal struggle among participants, conflicts with social control agents, and sometimes cooperation with other deviant subcultures characterize the processes that shape these phases of development.
Social gangs mark the first phase in the early formation of skinheads, which began around 1978 and lasted until about 1984. While stylistic experimentation fueled this early development, these were not simply kids hanging out at the local mall trying on the newest "rebel" fashion. Many were building an identity around a shared organizational name, initiation rites (e.g., jump-ins) that had long been a part of the gang culture (Vigil 1988), semi-hierarchical social roles, and non-specialized, "garden-variety" delinquency (e.g., vandalism, under-age drinking, petty theft) (Schneider 1999; Klein 1995, 1971). These early skinhead gangs bonded through shared interests (Miller 1978) that included styles such as Doctor Martin boots, blue jeans, and military-style flight jackets, specialized or "slang" language such as "skin chicks" (i.e., female skinheads), "bro" (i.e., brother), "firms" (i.e., specific gangs), practices that included the delinquent activities mentioned above, but also attending music shows and aggressive dancing, and maybe, most importantly, fighting, an ideology that stressed masculinity, partying, and defending local territories. Shared interests expressed through style, music, and argot provided participants with a common language. This common language was increased in meaning when shared interests were translated into the desire to defend specific social spaces (e.g., neighborhoods, parks, music clubs). According to Schneider (1999), protecting turf and engaging in a pattern of conflict separate many youth formations from gangs. Defending turf, honor, and racial/ethnic pride helps gang members construct a framework for understanding their world by identifying "enemies" and crystallizing core values. From the beginning, whiteness was important to skinhead identity but not their raison d'être. Race became the core organizing principle only after they began developing close ties with domestic and international adult white supremacist organizations. In the earliest phase, gang members held a range of racial views, but one of the most salient revolved around the perception that white youth were increasingly victimized by a host of social forces, such as minority street gangs, educational curriculums characterizing whites as historical "villains," and changing demographics that would eventually make whites a minority.
The transition to political gangs occurred between 1984 and 1994 as skinhead identity became increasingly anchored in race. During this phase, shifting internal dynamics and budding relationships between skinhead gangs and factions of the white supremacist movement (e.g. the White Aryan Resistance [WAR]) helped mobilize a racism that had previously been episodic and relatively unfocused. While earlier skinhead gangs expressed racism, it was not tightly coupled to a political movement's ideology. What helped structure skinhead racism was their participation in white supremacist political activism. Skinheads began to channel racist sentiments in an organized fashion that made sense within the framework provided by white supremacist activists. Political gangs developed as members constructed a powerful racist ideology that, at least partially, included neo-Nazism and that introduced political currents beyond the neighborhood, township, or city. For instance, while social gangs were mobilizing around boundary-crossing at the local level (i.e. a member of a rival gang entering their turf), political gangs were mobilizing around the ZOG discourse, a discourse which explained grievances as orchestrated by a world-wide Jewish conspiracy. These changes were part of the politicization process, which entails adopting new political beliefs, a new discourse, and participating in various types of political activism (e.g. marches, leafleting, and rallies). Politicization also diminished the importance of previous interests such as territoriality by introducing relatively abstract notions of space (e.g. state power as opposed the neighborhood) (Brotherton 1999).

Yet, the move toward politicization describes a general shift in skinhead subculture and it is not intended to describe a wholesale change that researchers have implied (e.g. Hamm 1993; Moore 1993). Not all skinhead gangs embraced a political stance. There were outlying currents that embraced strident racism, but not political activism. Others splintered and formed anti-racist gangs. Still others were ambiguous about race, favoring a “pro-American” ultra-nationalistic stance that often included racism, but veered away from the trend toward neo-Nazism. Despite these diverse currents, the period between 1984 and 1994 was most associated with an organizational growth surrounding politicized skinhead gangs.
By the late 1980s, racist skinheads' highly visible political activism was drawing notoriety and repression. Around the epicenters for skinhead activity (e.g. Huntington Beach), police departments and other community organizations (e.g. the Orange County Human Rights Commission) began paying more attention to these gangs. Surveillance and arrests were forcing skinheads to curtail their activities. In response to these efforts, some white supremacist organizations began advocating covert resistance strategies as a way to deflect social control agents. Many skinheads were questioning the effectiveness of public-level activism and opted for less organized or easily traceable affiliations. The result has not necessarily meant a de-politicization, but rather a de-emphasis on highly visible political activity. This de-emphasis helped create subcultural space for another current to emerge.

Economic gangs are the third phase in skinhead subculture development. The time-period of this phase is the hardest to specify, but by the late 1990s, a clear shift of emphasis toward economic gangs was evident. These gangs were also racist but their primary interests surrounded profit-oriented criminal activity. They did not participate in political activism nor were they as well connected to the white supremacist movement as earlier political gangs. The relationship between racism and criminal activity ranged depending upon the specific organization and other factors like the surrounding community. This change in emphasis was facilitated by three factors.

The first factor, the shift from public protest to less visible activism, created the perception among law enforcement that political skinhead gangs no longer existed and thus only economic skinhead gangs appeared active. Further, with political skinheads desiring a quieter existence, there was a coalescence of interests between economic and political gangs. Both emphasized secrecy to avoid social control and this survival interest reduced the social and ideational distance between economic and political gangs.

Increasing rates of skinhead incarceration is the second factor explaining this change. In the late 1980s, law enforcement agencies stepped up their efforts to halt skinhead activities and disband their gangs. This campaign was largely successful and resulted in the
incarceration of a significant portion of skinheads for a wide-range of offenses. Incarceration helped forge new organizational ties with the most powerful and notorious white prison gang in the United States, the Aryan Brotherhood (AB). The AB's origins date back to California's San Quentin State Prison in the 1960s. The AB is a racist prison gang, but their first objective is maintaining a high status in the prison system. This has meant, paradoxically, cultivating an alliance with the Mexican Mafia prison gang in order to gain power against the Black Guerilla Family prison gang. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the AB began recruiting young white inmates from the California Youth Authority to assist with their criminal operations, which included the distribution of methamphetamine. These recruiting efforts grew during the 1990s as greater numbers of skinheads were incarcerated. Since then, two skinhead gangs, the Nazi Lowriders (NLR) and Public Enemy Number One (PENI) have developed close working relationships with the AB. Skinheads' relationship with the AB is comparable to their earlier relationship with WAR. Both the AB and WAR provided skinhead gangs with important network links that influenced their organizational emphases. However, while WAR preached political sophistication in the sense of adopting a global outlook and organization, the AB preached economic sophistication, with an emphasis upon participation in the highly profitable methamphetamine trade.

The third factor that led to the rise of economic gangs results from the skinheads' paradoxical relationship with methamphetamine. Traditionally, many skinheads have been anti-drug (not withstanding their notoriously large amounts of alcohol consumption). Yet, some gangs are either ambivalent or unopposed to certain drugs. Although skinheads' involvement in the distribution of methamphetamine grew as ties with the AB developed, there is a subcultural precedence linking skinheads to this drug. The use of methamphetamine has never been as prevalent as alcohol, but some skinheads have used (and sold) this drug since the beginning of the subculture in Los Angeles during the early 1980s. The selection of methamphetamine may reflect a subcultural homology between skinhead
culture (e.g., aggression, ruggedness, and fast-paced living style) and the typical psycho-physiological effects of methamphetamine consumption. The pre-existing subcultural connection to methamphetamine, the AB's mentoring, and the potential for high profits led some skinhead gangs to establish themselves as significant "players" in the methamphetamine trade. These skinhead gangs continued along this criminal current, forging ties with the infamous Hells' Angeles motorcycle gang and even doing business (trading methamphetamine for guns) with Asian gangs in Southern California.

Although skinhead gangs in Southern California have developed a predominant focus on economic gain, significant subcultural diversity continues. Like previous phases that I identified, not all skinhead gangs developed an economic interest. Some retained a political orientation, and others periodically moved between the two emphases. Still others rejected both the overt political stance (because it was typically associated with neo-Nazism) and the economic orientation, (because it is typically associated with criminal enterprise), and are instead best characterized as skinheads who advocate cultural style. Changes in the skinhead subculture have neither progressed in a continuous direction nor has it ever been completely dominated by one particular emphasis (although, as I argue, distinct developmental phases are apparent). Although there are distinct phases, we should not confuse these phases with the assumption that all skinhead gangs fit neatly into the same category. During each of the phases I identify, diversity remains a prominent characteristic. It is my goal to explain why and how these phases occurred, their implications for the future of the skinhead subculture and, more generally, their implications for our understanding of subcultural change.
Notes

1 Personal Communication with the author, 2/23/03.

2 Studies that exemplify this problem include: Miller 1958; Cohen 1955; see also Hall and Jefferson 1976; Hebdige 1979 for treatments of British working-class youth subcultures which also suffer from these biases.

3 The Black Guerrilla Family (BGF) is typically found in adult prisons, but has also been reported as active in jails, and in juvenile correctional institutions. While it was founded in the California prison system, the BGF has been reported in a number of other states (Arizona, Georgia, Indiana, Minnesota, Missouri, Nevada, New Jersey, Texas, Washington, and Wisconsin). The written constitution of the BGF consists of 16 pages of single spaced typed text. This is one of the few gang constitutions that clearly indicates an intent to engage in armed conflict (Knox 2002).
CHAPTER 3

METHODS

In December 1996, I obtained approval from the Office of Sponsored Programs to conduct research with members of the white supremacy movement. Following the Chicago School tradition, I used a multi-method case study approach (see Denzin 1978) to develop an in-depth understanding of a population whose public perception tends to be more informed by sensational media depictions than by the systematic collection and analysis of empirical evidence. I combined structured and unstructured interviews, participant observation, and archival research to study the subcultural development of racist skinheads in Los Angeles. I selected this location as it is thought to have the largest number of skinheads in the United States and was the site of one of the earliest formations of U.S. skinheads (Moore 1993; ADL 1989).

As I explained in chapter 2, existing skinhead research is primarily cross-sectional and treats subcultural participation as a static variable (Blazak and Wooden 2001; Hamm 1993), which makes it difficult to examine processes of subcultural change. In contrast, I use a developmental perspective (Schneider 1999; Moore 1991; Hagedorn 1988) that allows for the exploration of the career trajectories of gang subcultures.

In his study of the skinhead subculture, Wood's (1999: 133) correctly points out that "the history of a subculture cannot adequately be gleaned from interviews with current [italics mine] subcultural members." He proposes that researchers examine the "traces" or artifacts left behind such as song lyrics, subcultural magazines, and other primary resources. While this type of evidence is a useful tool, Wood neglects the importance of interviews.
with "old-timers" who may or may not still be active participants in the subculture. These "old heads" (Brotherton 1999) provide the researcher with an invaluable source of information that primary documents alone cannot. Subcultural documents are often created at the pinnacle of participation, by members who are experiencing a "high" (McAdam 1988) resulting from their involvement. These experiences alter their perceptions and affect the construction of these subcultural texts, which makes research that relies solely on them problematic (Blee 1996).

Skinhead history is hard to track, partly because many of the best "skinhead historians" are law enforcement and "watchdog" organizations, neither of which adheres to the same methodological standards as the social scientist. There are indications that some research findings from law enforcement and watchdog organizations suffer from agency contamination and thus lack both reliability and validity (Baron 1997). To overcome these weaknesses and gain a thorough and rich history of the skinhead subculture, I used multiple sources of data, double-checked findings, and searched for "negative" evidence that would add complexity or question existing findings. Theses procedures, referred to as "triangulation," are used to reduce the likelihood of misinterpretation (Altheide and Johnson 1994; Huberman and Miles 1994; Denzin 1978). Triangulation is based upon the notion that "no single method can ever completely reveal all the relevant features of empirical reality necessary for testing or developing a theory" (Denzin 1978: 28).

My research also relies upon the "case study" strategy (Stake 1994; Feagin, Orum, and Sjoberg 1991; Ying 1989). A case is a phenomenon occurring in a bounded context (i.e. the unit of analysis) and attention is given to a vaguely defined temporal, social, and physical boundary (Stake 1994). My case represents each of these three dimensions: temporal (between 1978 and 2002); social (skinhead subculture); and physical (Los Angeles). I aim to provide an in-depth and rich examination of the particularities of this case as well as use it to illustrate several characteristics about broader features of gang subcultures and their developmental processes. Thus my level of analysis combines what others refer to as an
“intrinsic” and a “instrumental” case study (Stake 1994: 237). The former refers to research that concentrates on the specifics of a given case, and the latter refers to studies that use a case to represent certain features or to refine theory.

To analyze this case, I completed 127 interviews and more than 1000 hours of participant observation with skinheads across the Los Angeles area. The latter method was critical to assess the current trends within this subculture. The sample of skinheads I interviewed was predominantly white males (94% were male, while 6% were female). This male over-representation is not surprising as the skinhead subculture is a predominantly male one (Blee 2001). That all of my interviewees were “white” should also not come as a surprise, given the skinhead emphasis upon racism. However, despite the importance of a racist ideology, skinhead racism is not always a completely totalizing worldview. For example, two of my interviewees had surnames that were racially/ethnically ambiguous (i.e. “Diaz”). Both claim that their lineage is Spanish and not Mexican, thereby making them appropriately “Aryan”. Yet, one of these skinheads also indicated that, as a child, other children and some family members refereed to him as a “spic”. Relying on secondary sources, I also found through secondary sources that one of my interviewees had Native American lineage on his mothers’ side of the family, while another skinhead fathered a “mixed-race” baby with an Arab-American woman. The skinhead’s relationship with the Arab-American woman occurred during a period of time when his participation in the skinhead subculture had dissipated. Since the birth of his child, the skinhead’s level of involvement has increased, and he now plays in a white power band popular among skinheads across the globe. Nonetheless, he maintains regular contact (although secret) with his child and his child’s “non-white” mother. In terms of social class, no clear patterns existed among the skinheads I interviewed. This is also not surprising considering the cross-section of social classes represented in the larger skinhead subculture (Anderson 2001; Hamm1993). The majority (N=11) of respondents described their parents class
standing as "middle-class," while three skinheads described it as "upper-middle class," and six respondents described their parents class standing as "working-class".

I also conducted archival research, including the analysis of watchdog organizations' official reports, newspaper accounts, court documents, and various types of documentary evidence that law enforcement officials provided (e.g. letters written by skinheads, videotaped interviews of skinheads conducted by law enforcement personnel). Newspaper articles on the skinheads were drawn primarily from the Los Angeles Times, the Orange County Register, the Los Angeles Weekly, and the San Bernardino Tribune. I selected these articles through a structured, exhaustive search of the Lexus-Nexus data-base and microfilm indexes of the Los Angeles Times to 1980 using the search terms: skinhead, neo-Nazi, white supremacy, white power, hate- (including hate-crime, hate group, etc.). With the assistance of research staff, I accessed each of the Southern Poverty Law Center and Anti-Defamation League's publications that discussed skinheads. From the analysis of each of these secondary documents, I developed a list of skinhead court cases on file in southern California. This list allowed me to request these court documents and examine them for any pertinent information that would shed light on the skinhead subculture.

I analyzed this data to gain a better understanding of the emergence of the skinhead subculture and its development. These documents provided crucial pieces of information that would otherwise be difficult to obtain. These included descriptions of important events (e.g. pieces of group history), demographic information, and descriptions of skinheads' lives.

Two potential problems arise when sampling a secretive population such as the skinheads. The first is to focus upon leaders at the exclusion of rank and file participants, and the second is to over-sample participants who remain highly active as opposed to those whose participation has dissipated over the years. Both tendencies are problematic as rank-and-file participants and individuals whose participation dissipated over time may have fundamentally different perspectives of the skinhead subculture than either core members.
or participants who have remained active. I resolved these problems by using a multidimensional approach that relied upon a variety of data sources thereby allowing me to identify a full-range of skinhead participants. I primarily relied upon a "snowball" sampling strategy where a researcher collects data on a few members of the target population and asks those individuals to provide information needed to locate other members of the population (Babbie 1998). Additionally, I also utilized the "reputational" method, which, in this case, entailed asking informants to generate names of skinheads and descriptions of their participation. I supplemented this technique by providing informants with names of persons identified as skinheads by secondary sources and asked these informants about their knowledge of this person (e.g. "have you ever heard of Billy Banks?"). Finally, I used secondary sources, such as newspaper accounts, to identify individual participants. These strategies are commonly used by researchers who study hidden and hard-to-reach populations (Becker 1966).

The decision to interview non-skinhead, racist leaders such as Tom Metzger and Richard Butler was motivated by my analysis of secondary documents which highlighted their role in recognizing the importance of skinheads and attempting to recruit them. Since both Metzger and Butler are relatively widely known public figures, it was easy to contact them. Contacting individual skinheads, however, was much more difficult. During a field visit to the Aryan Nations in the summer of 1999, I met a "white power" music producer with contacts among skinheads in the United States who agreed to refer me to several key skinhead leaders in Southern California. Once I established these contacts, I was able to secure additional referrals to a greater number of skinheads in the area, some of whom played a relatively peripheral role. Simultaneously, I began conducting field visits in the Los Angeles area in order to observe the contemporary skinhead subculture and to cultivate relationships with "old heads" knowledgeable about the history of the skinhead subculture. To provide a more thorough disclosure of my methods, the following section discusses some of the "tools" I used during fieldwork with Southern California skinheads.
Interviews

I used interviews as the primary source of data for this study, and participant observation and archival research as supplemental techniques (Lofland and Lofland 1995). The interviews were primarily unstructured and typically occurred in people’s homes or in public settings (e.g. restaurants etc.). Unstructured interviewing is open-ended, allowing subjects to respond without having to choose between fixed categories (Fontana and Frey 1994). I also used “oral histories,” “life histories,” and “ethnographic interviewing” (Fontana and Frey 1994; Blee 1993; Douglas 1985; Spradley 1979). Spradley (1979) summarizes “the ethnographic interview” as a “series of friendly conversations into which the researcher slowly introduces new elements to assist informants to respond as informants” (Spradley 1979: 31).

It includes: 1) giving informant an explanation of the research (multiple times); 2) expressing cultural ignorance; 3) asking initial question and re-state as needed; 4) expressing interest during informant responses whenever possible; 5) Re-stating informant responses using their words; 6) breaking up informant responses to “grand” questions by asking more specific questions regarding aspects of informant’s response; 7) asking descriptive, structural and contrast questions; 8) creating hypothetical situations; 9) when ending the interview, expressing interest, stating that you have much more to learn, identifying topics not covered, and establishing the next interview (summarized from Spradley 1979: 31-33).

For the sake of consistency I use the term “life history,” to designate a technique which allows researchers to collect information that is not necessarily recorded in written documents, information which has often been used to reach ignored, oppressed, and forgotten groups (Fontana and Frey 1994). As, Blee (1993) contends, “oral histories can tap into the complexity of political experiences and beliefs more directly than can documentary sources” (Blee 1993: 599). Because racists and other “far” right groups typically espouse
beliefs that are an anathema to historians and other social scientists, there has been little attention paid to their life stories (Blee 1993).

The life-history interview "presents the experiences and definitions held by one person, one group, or one organization as this person, group, or organization interprets those experiences" (Denzin 1978: 215). To gain a thorough life history, researchers often conduct a series of interviews with the same respondent and use various types of techniques ranging from standardized close-ended survey instruments to open-ended and unstructured questions. One of the objectives of the life-history method is to derive the sequencing of an individual's life. Shaw (1966) suggests using a "life history guide" to increase the level of organization during the process of data collection.

A key component of the life-history technique is the use of multiple interview sessions with the same respondent. Using multiple sessions allows the researcher to conduct preliminary data analysis in order to assess which issues need further investigation or clarification during the follow-up sessions. One of the central techniques of verification when conducting life-history interviews is triangulation (Denzin 1978). The use of multiple sources of data such as verifying interviews through official records, newspaper accounts and interviews with peers, family members, and other acquaintances is critical to assessing the validity of life history interviews. Using a checklist to help guide and provide a loose structure to the interviews (Shaw 1966), I would typically ask subjects how they "discovered" the skinhead subculture, their previous subcultural affiliations, motivations for participating in the skinhead subculture, degree and quality of participation, subjects' perspectives as to why skinheads emerged, and changed.

My interviewees included key skinhead leaders who were essential in the initial formation of various skinhead groups, more peripheral rank-and-file members, "non-skinhead" racist leaders (e.g. Tom Metzger and Richard Butler) who were among the first to promote the importance of the skinheads to the larger white supremacist movement, law enforcement officers who have expertise about Southern California skinheads, and investigative
researchers from "watchdog" organizations (e.g. Anti-Defamation League and Simon Wiesenthal Center) (see Appendix 1 for further description of the interview subjects).

Participant Observation

My visits in the field ranged from several hour meetings to one-week visits where I stayed in the homes of skinhead members and accompanied them to various social/recreational activities (parties, concerts, dinner etc.). Gold (1958) distinguishes between four "positions" a researcher can occupy in the field: 1) the complete participant role; 2) participant-as-observer role; 3) the observer-as-participant role; and 4) the complete observer role (Gold 1958). The role that the researcher assumes results from the stage of the research process, and the relationship between the researcher and subjects in the various settings (Adler and Adler 1994; 1987). I assumed each of these roles in varying degrees, sliding between participant as observer and observer as participant most of the time.

Various fieldwork roles emerge in different stages of fieldwork. Shaffir and Stebbins (1991:7) outline what they refer to as the "four stages" of fieldwork: 1.) entering the field; 2.) learning how to play one's role while there; 3.) maintaining and surviving the several kinds of relations that emerge; 4.) leaving the field.

*Getting in* is the process of negotiating entry into the research setting. Access to a research setting varies significantly and corresponds to an "investigator's relationship to the setting, the ascriptive categories of the researcher and researched and the specific nature of the setting" (Shaffir and Stebbins 1991: 25). Many researchers correctly argue that gaining access is a process that is best understood as occurring throughout the research study (Burgess 1991; Fontana 1977; Geer 1970). In my case, one of the most important initial factors that assisted in my "successful" entry was simply "race." Had I not been "white," initial entry would have been difficult.
Learning roles in the field includes observing and beginning to appreciate the distinctive meanings and rules of behavior among subjects (Matza 1969). Gaining trust and establishing rapport are crucial to building an understanding from “within” (Shaffir and Stebbins 1991). During the course of my fieldwork, I familiarized myself with “white power” music (a genre I had previously never listened to), as it is important to skinheads. Another important aspect of “learning the ropes” is assuming various research roles (Adler and Adler 1994). Here I struggled trying to decide when to participate and when to step back and observe. There are a variety of perspectives about the fieldworker’s role, ranging from the prescription that fieldworkers remain detached and distant (Richardson 1991; Gordon 1987) to “becoming the phenomenon” (Mehan and Wood 1975). I tended to utilize a pragmatic and situational “fly by the seat of my pants” approach. At times, I remained distant and quiet, sometimes listening attentively and observing closely, sometimes withdrawing and wishing I were somewhere else. At other times, I actively participated, feeling enjoyment and comradeship with those around me. As some observers point out, the researcher does not only determine this uneasy balance, but it is determined for him or her by the demands and expectations of the researched (Shaffir and Stebbins 1991; Emerson 1983). All these issues continued to play important roles in “maintaining relations” during fieldwork.

Leaving the field is often seen as the “final act,” but has not received nearly as much attention in the ethnographic literature as gaining entry (Shaffir and Stebbins 1991). Because I did not permanently live with any of these skinheads, my fieldwork was marked by continual entry and exit. This made rapport much more difficult to attain and maintain, as it was not possible for me to visit them on a daily or even weekly basis. At the same time, this mode of participation facilitated leaving the field, as it was always a continuous and expected part of the research process.

While participant observation may sound easy – “just hanging out” – it is in fact, a complicated process that is often emotionally, physically and psychologically overwhelming.
A fieldworker must, in a relatively short amount of time, become acquainted with the field. This includes learning members' speech (or argot), dress codes, and other formal and informal "rules of living" as well as the "tacit knowledge" of the people studied (Altheide and Johnson 1994). Tense, despondent, awkward, anxious, scared, shocked, amazed, angry, and sad were all feelings I experienced at one time or another during fieldwork. I often felt like a "creep," "stranger," "outsider," "spy," "mark" and "convert" as well as feeling unwanted, ignored, and barely tolerated (Lofland and Lofland 1995; Sharriff and Stebbins 1991; Van Maanen 1988; Wax 1971).

Not only is participant observation akin to an emotional "roller-coaster," it is also intellectually taxing. Participant observation requires the researcher to listen closely to what people say, observe what they do, and keep careful notes during and following field visits. I recorded direct quotes when possible, compiled summaries of conversations when direct quotes escaped my memory after leaving the field, and recorded detailed "thick" descriptions of my surroundings (Lofland and Lofland 1995; Van Maanen 1988; Johnson 1975).

Beyond emotional, psychological and physical stress, participant observation also poses a number of situational challenges. One that I faced during my fieldwork was consuming large amounts of alcohol. Certainly, memory after drinking bouts becomes problematic, but as alcohol is a great comfort and a social lubricant in otherwise uncomfortable surroundings, my consumption increased noticeably. Sharing "vices" is also an important strategy to gain trust and improve rapport (Fine 1993; Wax 1971). Since drinking beer was an important recreational activity invested with ritual-like importance, abstaining from this practice would have lessened my legitimacy and hampered establishing rapport.
Data Management and Interpretation

To better clarify my approach, I will now discuss some of the conventional criteria for evaluating qualitative data. The “objectivist” perspective typically applies four criteria to scientific inquiry: 1) internal validity: the degree to which results correctly “fit” the phenomenon; 2) external validity: the degree to which results can be generalized to other settings; 3) reliability: the extent to which findings can be replicated or reproduced by another researcher; and 4) objectivity: the extent to which results are free from bias (summarized from Guba and Lincoln 1994).

Throughout this project, I utilized an inductive post-positivist approach to gather, manage, and analyze data (Altheide and Johnson 1994; Miles and Huberman 1994). Shortly after beginning my fieldwork, I began developing files to manage my data. My fieldnotes were filled with chronologically ordered descriptions of the people and surroundings, their interactions with each other and myself. As accurately as possible, I recorded direct observations (using quotes to distinguish verbatim accounts from those paraphrased) (Lofland and Lofland 1995). While writing fieldnotes, I also developed interpretive notes of my impressions (margin notes) such as possible themes or patterns in what I was observing (Huberman and Miles 1994).

Later, after conducting more interviews and spending more time in the field “mucking around,” I started to develop relatively abstract categories for analysis or analytical notes (e.g. phases of subcultural development, identity formation etc.) (Lofland and Lofland 1995; Huberman and Miles 1994). This included comparing and contrasting themes, noting relations between them, and moving back and forth between first-level data and general categories (Huberman and Miles 1994; Strauss and Corbin 1994). Through this process, I was able to generate a model describing the various phases of the skinhead subculture career. This included distinguishing the dominant emphases that mark each of these phases.
Ethics and the Fieldwork Process

Any research project must consider a number of ethical issues, and these were especially difficult in light of the beliefs and practices of those I studied in this project. If the use of deception is one of the “thorny” ethical issues that fieldworkers must confront, I am afraid I am guilty of using a considerable amount of it. Although I did not pursue a “deep cover” strategy (Fine 1980) where subjects are completely unaware of a researcher’s “true” identity, I often “passed” myself off as more sympathetic than I really was. Worse yet, I was acutely aware of tacitly encouraging destructive beliefs and practices that I find reprehensible.

As with the debates surrounding the appropriate distance fieldworkers should establish with their subjects, the use of deception is also strongly contested. For some, the use of deception in research is always unacceptable and should be strictly avoided (Bulmer 1982; Erickson 1967). On the other hand, Jack Douglas (1976) developed what is sometimes referred to as “investigative fieldwork,” an approach that emphasizes the necessity and importance of deception to accomplish worthwhile fieldwork (Douglas 1976). Mitchell (1993) emphasizes the role deception plays in the everyday world and its inevitable use, especially as a research practice. As Roth (1970) correctly points out, during fieldwork, it is often impractical and presumptuous to announce one’s status as a researcher (Roth 1970). Others advocate a more situational approach to the use of deception (and ethics more generally). Denzin (1989) summarizes his debate most succinctly by suggesting that, “No single set of ethical standards can be developed, because each situation encountered requires a different ethical stance” (Denzin 1989: 261).

I hope that the reader does not expect any ethical resolution because I have not found one (nor do I think one necessarily exists). I concur with Denzin (1989) that ethics are far too complicated to establish “hard and fast” rules. While I would never try to hurt a research subject (physically, psychologically, or emotionally) the possibility always remains that I have done so. I have thought of these issues often, and am in frequent dialogue with
others and myself about how a researcher might handle these difficulties. At times, I maintained ethical guidelines, and at others, I know I violated them. At times, I verbally espoused beliefs that were contrary to my values; I laughed, smiled, and nodded in affirmation to words that were repugnant to me. For example, in situations where I listened to a person discuss how “white men don’t have any civil rights” I would nod (as I usually do while listening to another person speak) and say things like “uh-uh” and “yep”.

George Marcus (1994) refers to “messy texts,” which characterize a “new” genre of ethnographic writing that is purposefully reluctant, uncertain, ambiguous, sensitive and “open” to multiple readings and interpretations. However, messy texts say as much about ethics as they do about writing. Can an uncertain, ambiguous, reluctant, sensitive, and “open,” ethnographer ever really adhere to a more definitive ethical approach? The efforts to legislate and institutionalize norms governing research are based upon the premise that a researcher “controls” and “commands” her/his “field”. While this assumption may apply to the laboratory, it is grossly inaccurate in the “real world”. My field experiences (as I think most do) problematize this assumption of control. While I do not promote an “anything goes ethics,” I believe we need a continual dialogue addressing concerns, rather than “absolutist” policies (often engineered by bureaucrats seeking to avoid possible litigation) which ignore the real concrete, unpredictable, difficult and sometimes urgent ethical dilemmas that field researchers face on a day-to-day basis.
Notes

¹ For a complete discussion of the Chicago School's methodological strategies see Denzin 1978. My approach was most influenced by Shaw's (1966) life history technique in the Jack Roller.

² 1987 is the first time the term skinhead is used by the Los Angeles Times, thus newspapers provided little assistance gathering data regarding the early years of the skinhead subculture.
CHAPTER 4

INITIAL FORMATION

Where did the skinheads come from? What interests and grievances motivated the first skinheads? Were there any significant changes in the skinhead subculture during this phase of development? This chapter provides tentative answers to these questions. I argue that skinheads emerged through a combination of two forces: (1) changes indigenous to the American punk subculture and (2) the cultural diffusion of the skinhead style from Britain to North America. I trace how these forces helped produce the skinhead subculture and I also trace the evolution of skinheads starting as individuals primarily concerned with style to the formation of social gangs. What started as primarily stylistic experimentation among some segments of the Los Angeles punk scene, eventually “blossomed” into loosely organized gangs.

This chapter confirms Wood’s (1999: 132 and 137) claims about the indigenous origins of the skinheads; however, I dispute his contention that these origins were “nonracist” and am most skeptical about his characterization of the Hardcore punk trend as “a nonracist youth phenomenon.” I find that although Hardcore may not have been dominated by neo-Nazism, racist elements existed and served as important reference points that later skinheads drew and extended upon. Most importantly, this chapter describes the early genesis of the skinhead subculture. Skinhead origins resembled a collage of elements leading to various subcultural trajectories. These trajectories included struggles and tension resulting in several different factions.
Several southern California youth subcultures played an important role in the initial formation of skinhead gangs, but none more important than the punks. Once certain dynamics were present within the punk subculture, the eventual transition from punk to skinhead became possible. According to Moore (1993), punk rock provided the subcultural foundation for skinhead development. In southern California, most of the skinheads that emerged in the 1980s trace their roots to the punk scene. Once they emerged, Los Angeles skinheads were akin to social gangs (Schneider 1999) primarily based upon fraternal relations, stylistic interests, and cafeteria-type delinquency (e.g. non-specialized violations that included graffiti, fighting, under-age drinking, theft etc.). As skinhead gangs developed, “racial territoriality” became a “focal concern” (Miller 1958), marking one of the most important changes in the subcultural career of the skinheads. However, indigenous developments were not the only influence on skinhead formation. The skinheads were also influenced by the international cultural diffusion that originated in the U.K. Through various forms of communication (album covers, music ‘zines, “tales” passed on from those who visited Britain), elements of southern California punk culture began emulating these “foreign” and “exotic” styles (Wood 1999; Hamm 1993).

Indigenous Sources of the Skinhead Subculture
in Southern California

No other subculture played as important a role in the emergence of skinheads as the punks. As Moore (1993) points out, to understand the formation of skinheads one first begin with the punks. The punks bear the closest relation to the skinheads, a slightly distant and sometimes hostile first cousin. Punk came of age during the hard times of economic recession and in the wake of a litany of youth-based political movements⁴. In one sense, punk can be seen as a rejection of left-wing political movements, in favor of a dystopian vision and an ideology that rejected all types of formalisms (Marcus 1989). Extending upon the Hippie rejection of structured politics, punk replaced the easy-going
passivity associated with the “counter-culture” with unstructured rage that sought to attack everything that represented the mainstream status quo. Punk identity in the U.S. was less class-based than in Britain, but it maintained a strong sense of anxiety in relation to a rapidly changing world. For example, Southern California punk bands like Hermosa Beach’s, Black Flag, expressed this anxiety about changing demographics with their song White Minority: “Gonna be a white minority, All the rest will be the majority, Gonna feel inferiority.” Black Flag illustrated an immediate awareness of social changes that was expressed through unorganized anger. There was little sense of the larger political economy which was helping generate these demographic shifts or any endorsement of a specific and organized political agenda (i.e. neither fascist nor socialist). The original southern California punk scene was based around the Hollywood area and its participants were older and “artsy,” although this changed as younger and aggressive suburbanites were drawn to the scene (Spitz and Muller 2001).

Hardcore and Punk Gangs

By the late 1970s, southern California punk starting getting “hardcore” (Spitz and Mullen 2001), which signaled a more aggressive and suburban trend in the scene. Hardcore referred to a faster style of music and a more physically aggressive attitude, which was expressed through random violence directed at other punks during music shows (especially in the “pit”). Hardcore attracted a very diverse crowd; gangsters, punks, skinheads, surfers and stoners all came together to form a volatile and often violent mix (Blush 2001). Hardcore was also influential in expanding the boundaries of punk and transcending from “performance art” to “real” physical violence. As one observer explained, in the old days, “people [were] pretending that they were violent but they were only playacting... when that happens you’re eventually gonna have someone who comes along and says, ‘Gee, guess what, I’m really violent. I’ll show you how to really beat up someone’” (Spitz and Mullen 2001: 223). For some of the “old-time” punks, this rigid adherence to a new more aggres-
sive style meant a departure from the non-conformist spirit that had been the core of punk culture. However, for the younger suburban kids, hardcore aggressiveness provided an important security device from those antagonistic toward punk culture:

Around that time [late 1970s] there were a lot of kids [ punks] who were getting seriously fucked up by these long-haired redneck hicks in their 4x4 vehicles, real Lynyrd Skynyrd kind of guys. They were going to punk shows and hiding out in the parking lot and ambushing us, and I think a couple of people died...nobody was doing anything about it. No disrespect against the Hollywood party punks...but they just weren't prepared to defend us out in the 'burbs where kids were getting beaten on all the time...(quoted in Spitz and Mullen 2001: P. 192)

Hardcore was most noted for its aggressiveness, but it also marked other changes in the punk subculture. Although Hardcore looked chaotic, it was a very conservative type of music governed by a strict code of what is and is not acceptable. This code covered everything from song structure and lyrics, to behavior, dress, and politics. This new style of punk fueled experimental forms of organization that while retaining a strong anti-authoritarian ethic began blending this with more rigid adherence to certain rituals and practices (Blush 2001; Spitz and Mullen 2001).

The punk trend toward hardcore was not without its detractors nor did all of those who favored a hard-edge music style appreciate the more aggressive posture or the cultural changes that this new style signaled. Some punks felt disconnected from the hardcore trend:

The Huntington Beach scene killed off the original open interpretation of punk concept...no rules, no dogma, no stereotyping...DIY [Do It Yourself] ideology...Once hardcore kicked in, there were very strict ways of dressing and weird codes of social behavior....” (quoted in Spitz and Mullen 2001: P. 224)
Nonetheless, the overall popularity of the hardcore punk style combined with the adoption of an exotic, hard-nosed, English subcultural form led to a fusion in youth culture that helped generate the Los Angeles skinheads. As a core member of one of the first Los Angeles skinhead gangs described,

Hardcore and skinheads were definitely connected. Hardcore took punk to a different level to a more extreme level, you could see it with the music - the dress, that's where there was a lot of overlap between skinhead and punk, and there was an overlap in members... (Skinhead Interview n., 11/20/02)

One historian of punk also notes the stylistic connection between hardcore and skinhead:

The rise of Hardcore coincided with the rise of Skinhead culture. In some ways the scenes overlapped. Edgier HC [Hardcore] types adopted Skinhead style. A shaved head provided the perfect fuck you to Hippies... Very few embraced the style and remained unfazed by the politics. Some racists' hatred was heartfelt; for others it was just a confrontational tool... (Blush 2001: P. 31)

As these quotes suggest, there was a stylistic and ideological overlap between Hardcore and Skinheads as well as important organizational linkages.

Hardcore not only provided a faster sound, but also introduced Los Angeles punk to loosely organized groups that were “gang-like” (Morash 1983). These were not the gangs of urban folklore made notorious by the Los Angeles Times and Hollywood (Moore 1991), but of a different sort. These gangs were not the product of poverty-stricken, de-industrialized areas in South-Central and East Los Angeles, but relatively affluent working and middle-class ones across the San Fernando and San Gabriel Valley, Orange County and the South Bay. The leader of one of these gangs known as “Vicious Circle” (VC) put it quite eloquently when he described the emergence of punk gangs:
Clockwork fuckin' Orange County...We were totally fucked up in the head...We'd been getting our asses kicked by parents, by the schools, and the police, and now it was like, 'Fuck you, we're monsters now, and you're fuckin' gonna pay for it!...Vicious Circle was more like a gang than a band, a brotherhood that just looked out for each other...VC [Vicious Circle] just rounded up all these psychos and guys we grew up with and then punk became a gang thing that everybody went with, the whole neighborhood went with it... (quoted in Spitz and Mullen 2001: Pp. 226-227)

Aside from VC, several other punk gangs emerged across Los Angeles. In late 1981, borrowing from the stylistic tradition of Hispanic gangs known as the “cholo-style” (Vigil 1988), a white gang from Long Beach mutated into the band Suicidal Tendencies (ST)\. The ringleader was vocalist Mike Muir and the Suicidals quickly built a reputation for dominating punk shows with brute violence, stabbing and beating other punks into submission (Blush 2001). During the 1970s and 1980s, other punk gangs included “The League” which was formed in 1978 and “The Family/Circle One” (not to be confused with the “Manson Family”), which was formed around 1980. The origins of the League and the Family were also seemingly innocuous; they were simply local punk bands and their closest fans. At a time when two of the largest African-American gangs, the Crips and Bloods were monitoring their own functions in and around their “hoods,” the Family and the League patrolled music shows, parties, clubs and any place where a fight could spark. They provided their own style of security for punk shows that was similar to the role of the Hell’s Angels for many rock bands (e.g. the Rolling Stones). As punk bands developed “followings,” these heterogeneous networks quickly grew and were tied together by a common identity built around the punk culture. According to one account “the Circle One concept ran along the lines of ‘a group bound together by common interests’ – ‘united as a whole, undivided’…” (Blush 2001: 98).
Maybe the largest and most hated punk gang to emerge in Los Angeles was the L.A. Death Squad (LADS). Late one night in 1980, following a fight at a Hollywood pizzeria and liquor store, five youths organized the LADS. The next day they made armbands and by 1982 were actively recruiting younger cohorts from across Los Angeles. During this time, the LADS had also adopted a cholo-style. By the mid-1980s another LADS set emerged “down south” in Orange County, but unlike their counterparts in L.A., the South-Side LADS did not initially adopt the traditional Hispanic gang style. Instead, they favored a skinhead style until 1989 when they eventually adopted the cholo style. Although the South-Side LADS were not well versed in racial politics, many held racist beliefs. That is, it would have been common for a LAD to view African-Americans as “niggers” or “people you can’t trust,” but it would have been uncommon for a LAD to have contact or even much familiarity with white supremacist organizations like the Ku Klux Klan. The relationship between the early South-Side LADS and skinheads is evident from a skinhead’s recollection of spending time with some South-Side LADS in juvenile hall:

Yeah, I was locked up with some LADS in La Habra [Orange County]. They [LADS] were basically like skinheads, but they were punks, you know what I mean…they were shaving their head but it still hadn’t evolved into a fascist thing, it was still not a serious political movement…they were definitely white power, a white power street gang but not all the LADS were like that. Some were just punk rockers, some were just a punk gang (Skinhead Interview f., 7/13/99).

Another early skinhead discusses the intersections between hardcore, punk gangs, skinheads and the genesis of these formations:

…the big ‘Skinhead Army’ plan comprised skins, crewcuts, flattops, and we decided we were just gonna eradicate this fucking hippie threat by any means necessary … within a couple of weeks, Dana had control of fuck, maybe a hundred guys…and that’s where the hardcore shit really started. It
was just a self-defense thing at the beginning and then we totally fucking took over.” (quoted in Spitz and Mullen 2001: P. 193)

In many ways, punk gang activity was similar to traditional gangs (e.g. non-specialized delinquency, claiming “turf,” shared symbols and styles to assert membership). Punk gangs were routinely engaged in conflict with the police and other youth subcultures; however, they were relatively unorganized and despite efforts at staking territory, they were highly transitory (Klein 1995; Short and Strotbeck 1976). A former punk gang member explained the motivation for some of these gangs: “A lot of these [punk] gangs were about survival too because a lot of these people were street people. They totally rejected society and they ended up on the streets of L.A. so they all banded together like a family” (Skinhead Interview f, 7/13/99). Several of these punk gangs in Los Angeles were located in Hollywood, which has historically attracted a large number of runaways (Ruddick 1994) and they often befriended these runaways by helping them survive on the streets.

Some members of these punk gangs adopted Nazi symbols in part as an act of defiance, but others wanted to express their rejection of liberal multi-cultural rhetoric that became increasingly popular during the 1980s within the mainstream of American political culture (Bennett 1995). According to a long-time Nazi Punk who associated with the League and the Family and later became a racist skinhead:

I don’t know if Circle One as a whole was a Nazi organization. It was just the members that I knew and hung out with were definitely white power.
But I don’t know if the leadership was that way. But the band, Circle One, if you listen to their lyrics, they’re very conservative. Their song Big Red Machine is anti-Communist. And so, I think probably it isn’t a secret but they didn’t do marches or flags...The ones that I knew all had swastika tattoos. (Skinhead Interview f, 7/13/99)

By 1981, the League splintered into several other youth organizations after the stabbing death of their principle leader. This was typical; punk gangs were highly transitory and
organizationally unstable. With key punk gangs and the punk subculture fragmenting (Spitz and Mullen 2001), a vacuum began developing in the arena of local youth culture. The Hardcore style and punk gangs helped develop a precedent for an aggressive identity within punk, encouraging some punks to extend upon these stylistic trends and coalesce around the hyper-masculine, clean-cut, working-class identity offered by the skinhead style. During this time, skinhead was mostly about style, an opportunity to embrace rugged musical forms and a “foreign” (read seductive) subculture. Race was only implicitly important; in much the way that it was to the punks. The majority (but not all) punks and skinheads were white kids. Although pockets of explicitly racist sentiments existed among punks and the early skinheads, white power politics had yet to become a consistent point of convergence.

Punks and Racial Politics

“I'm sorry for something I didn't do / Lynched somebody but I don't know who /

You blame me for slavery / A hundred years before I was born” (Minor Threat,

“Guilty of Being White”)

The extent to which punkers' self-consciously adopted a racist political identity is subject to debate. Historians of the punk subculture argue that, while punkers became fascinated with the symbols of Nazi Germany, they never adopted the politics of the Nazi ideology (Laing 1985; Hebdige 1979; Dancis 1978). According to Hebdige, “The signifier (swastika) had been willfully detached from the concept (Nazism) ... [The swastika] was exploited as an empty effect” (1979: 117). Hebdige (1979) and others strongly emphasize the distinction between the appropriation of symbols as a means to articulate a shock value (i.e. the punk's ideology of “fuckyouism”) and an actual ideological and political engagement with Nazism.

Although some punks detached the racist significance from the swastika, using it for “shock value,” other punks articulated a “sincere” affinity for explicit racism and Nazi
sympathies (Moore 1993). In fact, some skinheads became affiliated with the politics of Nazism as punks long before they ever shaved their head. As Tom Metzger, founder of the White Aryan Resistance claims, "the punk rock scene was important for providing a racial perspective, racialist punk rockers pre-dated skinheads in L.A." (Tom Metzger Interview, 1/29/99). Similarly, a punk gang member notes the subcultural precedence for the formation of racist skinheads, "If you look at early surfer history, like a lot of those guys from La Jolla, they were really like Nazi punks who just happened to be surfers...there's always been this punk subculture in surfing...." (quoted in Spitz and Mullen 2001: P. 225)

If much of this debate has centered on whether punks possessed actual Nazi affinities, the problem with this question has been a tendency to treat Nazi sympathies synonymously with racism. Equating racism with neo-Nazism has two polar effects. On one hand, some observers consider any example of incongruence between Punk and Nazism as proof of a lack of affinity (e.g. if we can't convincingly demonstrate that punks consciously used fascist symbols, then we can assume they were non-racist). On the other, in order to demonstrate the pervasiveness of punk racism, observers sometimes confuse any expression of racism as evidence of Nazi sympathies. Treating the issue in this way ignores that most racists are not Nazis (i.e. just because you are racist does not mean you are a Nazi) as well as the fact that some people who tinker with Nazism are not committed racists. Some argue that the punks who became skinheads had to undergo a "subcultural disengagement," or break from the punk scene before establishing a "racially oriented" skinhead identity (Anderson 2001; Hamm 1993). The characterization of punk as "nonracist" and skinhead as "racist" is overly simplistic and ignores how racist sentiments are transmitted and solidified in changing subcultural forms. Racist skinheads were not so much the result of a "break" with punk, but more of an extension and expansion of a complex system of de facto racism that permeated punk and early skinhead subcultures. While racism in the punk subculture remained largely undeveloped and informal, punk was extremely important in helping create a subcultural space for racist exposure, experimentation, and expression. The
punk scene was important not simply as a point of departure, but as site of political socialization. In this sense, the punk scene acted as a “cultural laboratory” for the skinheads (Melucci 1996, 1989). One skinhead reflects on his exposure to white supremacist ideology and the primacy of the punk subculture in his evolving “racial awareness”:

The first time I met Circle One was when I ran away from home to L.A. I went to L.A. for maybe a month or two, just living with some punks. Circle One took me in, they had a Circle One house. The first thing I remember they gave me some white supremacist literature and set me up with some friends and this was Hollywood, that’s how I first met them...(Skinhead Interview b., 6/23/01).

Another skinhead explains how he learned about the racial aspects of street culture through his punk affiliation:

I had a girlfriend and one of her friends was just getting out of the ‘pen’ [penitentiary] and he was League and he moved in with me for a while, so that’s how I started hanging around...he taught me a lot. Not so much about the political science of racism, but the street aspects, you know, you got your niggers here, your Mexicans here, how it works on the street...(Skinhead Interview c., 5/29/00).

While this street philosophy was distinct from the structured racism that this latter skinhead would ultimately learn, it provided an important foundation toward a thoroughly racialized understanding of the world. Far from a completely unorganized and incoherent form of racism, this street worldview recognized a system of racial status, characteristics, and potential threat (e.g. if you want...go to the Mexicans, don’t do business with blacks unless you have to; blacks will do this, while Mexicans will do this to you).

Nazi punks became pivotal to shaping the skinhead subculture toward an eventual explicit embracing of racist politics. These Nazi punks were “early risers” (Tarrow 1994) who made opportunities for collective action visible that had otherwise not been evident.
Many of them helped skinhead gangs during fights with subcultural opponents and some even helped with gang organization. Like the early skinhead gangs, most Nazi punks did not, despite their name, embrace a structured fascist ideology, but instead articulated a generic racism in response to their local experiences (neighborhood and school changes). Nazi Punks were not a completely distinct type of punk; they mingled freely and despite their racist sentiments were undifferentiated from the larger punk subculture. A former Nazi punk explains how they “fit” into the punk subculture:

Yeah people talked about Nazi Punks, but I don't think it was very political, I think it was just, it's hard to say. From one point of view, it might have been kind of like the left commie faggot punks were just coming down on us for being violent and not appreciating homos and not appreciating nons [nonwhites] and stuff like that, so the just labeled us the Aryan Mafia. But another aspect, too, there was a lot of racism that was embedded into the movement into people like myself and with a lot of other people too that I knew…There was a point when a swastika went from just being on a shirt with a bunch of different symbols, early punk rock had communist symbols, swastikas whatever, they used everything, it was big mish-mosh and then yeah around 80-81, it went from that to where it actually meant something because you had it by itself, then when you saw a swastika on someone, it meant something (Skinhead Interview α, 10/12/02).

This comment reveals that, while Nazi Punks were not especially active in racial politics, they did provide an important example of explicit racism, and helped alter the meaning of previously ambiguous symbols. Nazi Punks thus helped shape the future political direction that led to the development of racist skinhead gangs. Because the skinhead style originated in England and provided a source of subcultural transmission, it is important to briefly discuss the British origins of the skinheads.
The Foreign Roots of American Skinheads

The first wave of British skinheads was one of several working-class youth subcultures that emerged in the post-World War II era, including the “teddys,” “rockers,” “mods,” and “ punks” (Hebdige 1979). Beginning in the rapidly deteriorating working-class neighborhoods of London's East End (Moore 1994), skinheads were initially characterized as an attempt to “magically retrieve the sense of community that the parent working-class culture had lost” (Clarke 1976: 99). These first skinheads came of age in the late 1960s at the height of various left-wing progressive and counter-cultural movements that were sweeping the globe.

The early British skinheads were directly tied to specific neighborhoods (much like many African-American and Hispanic gangs in the U.S.), class-conscious, and embraced traditional notions of masculinity. While they did not explicitly associate themselves with Nazism, they were ardently nationalist in political orientation and fervently opposed to foreign immigration, which was reflected by their affinity for violently attacking Pakistani immigrants aka “Paki-bashing” (Hebdige 1979, Knight 1982). The first wave of skinheads, “were aware that they attended the worst schools, lived in the poorest districts, and had the worst jobs with the smallest wages. They perceived hippies in the same way as they viewed students, as idle layabouts living off the state” (Brake 1974: 188-190).

Although skinheads defined themselves along themes of nationalism, ultra-masculinity, and working-class issues (e.g. lack of economic opportunity, poor housing and neighborhood deterioration), they expressed political sentiments through stylistic imagery (Hebdige 1979). Toward this end, skinheads were described as creating a gross caricature of the working-class, “the look of the cartoonist lumpen-worker” (Frith 1981: 219). Further, they were not involved in traditional, organized political activities (e.g. unions, political parties, marches etc.). However, some observers confuse a lack political involvement with a lack of racist sentiments (c.f. Hebdige 1979; Cohen 1972). This is a mistake: “Paint House,” one of the first British skinhead gangs, listed, “Jews, young blacks, Pakistanis, and hippies”
under their category “People on our Backs” (quoted in Moore 1993: 66). Clearly, many of
the early British skinhead gangs were racist; however, this racism was not as organized as
the Nazi ideology that developed later on. In this respect, the first wave of British
skinheads of the late 1960s resembled the first skinhead gangs in Los Angeles during the
early and mid 1980s. By the mid-1970s, the skinheads had all but vanished from the streets
of England, giving way to other youth subcultural formations (e.g. the punks) (Knight
1982). The disappearance of the skinheads was confirmed by the 1976 essay entitled,
“Beyond the Skinheads: Comments on the Emergence and Significance of the Glamrock
Cult,” which proclaimed that, “Students of youth culture in Britain are agreed that the
skinheads are dead” (Taylor and Wall 1976: 43). By the mid 1970s, Britain witnessed the
emergence of another youth subculture, the punks, who, like the earlier skinheads, were
responding to economic stagnation and declining employment opportunities. Bands like the
infamous Sex Pistols sang about “Anarchy in the U.K.” as part of an assault on middle class
conventional values, as well as an expression of deep frustration with a world that increas­
ingly offered “no hope for your future.” However, punks did not share the skinheads’
puritanical adherence to an idealized vision of the working-class or the desire to resurrect
an ultra-masculine ethos (Hebdige 1979). In spite of their obituary, skinheads re-emerged
from the subcultural dustbin in the late 1970s and much of this second wave tentatively
became associated with the U.K.'s extreme right-wing political party, the National Front
(NF).

The British National Front (NF), saw the utility of drawing disaffected skinhead youth
into their ranks. During the 1977 British elections, the NF actively recruited skinheads to
assist as security officers for National Front candidates (Anderson 2001). This recruitment
was the most important moment in politicizing British skinhead nationalism and anti­
immigrant rhetoric. From this point forward, skinheads solidified a right-wing political
ideology. Just as important, they also developed an organizational affiliation that would
provide the foundation for the spread of skinheads. British skinhead music became decid­
edly more political and began to represent an identity based on racism. Veering away from punk anarchism toward racist politics and a heavy metal hard rock sound, the British band *Skrewdriver* became the premier skinhead white power band (Moore 1993). Band founder Ian Stuart Donaldson, became one of the prime leaders developing connections with the British National Front. Unlike the first wave of skinheads which was confined to the U.K., this second wave spread beyond the British Isles and emerged in several other European countries as well as North America.

More than Just a Shaved Head:
A Skinhead Identity Emerges

Although individual skinheads appeared on the American landscape in the late 1970s (Moore 1993), these youths were submerged within the punk rock scene and a "skinhead collective identity" had yet to form in any meaningful sense. In one form or another, most of the Southern California skinheads emerged from the punk subculture. These first skinheads were experimenting with style and extending upon Hardcore punk trends. After the splintering of the League and several other punk gangs, local leaders from these organizations formed the first skinhead gang, the Northside Firm in late 1981 in Los Angeles County. About a year later, the South Bay Skins (Los Angeles County), Fight For Freedom (FFF) (San Bernardino County), the Order Skins (Orange County) and the American Firm (San Bernardino and Riverside Counties) were formed.

The first skinhead gangs were, as one early member put it, "identity groups;" skinhead affiliation was represented through "identity markers" (shaved heads, Doctor Martin boots, braces [suspenders], musical preferences, tattoos etc.). Adopting a "foreign" subcultural style, early skinheads distinguished themselves from other youth subcultures and the average or "square" adolescent. These skinheads began to consciously model themselves after the British skinhead subculture that was now in its second wave. Music was central to the global transmission of the British skinhead style, and Los Angeles skinheads paid close
attention to British skinhead music bands like Sham 69, Skrewdriver, and the Four Skins. When naming the Northside Firm and the American Firm, Los Angeles skinheads were inspired by their English counterparts who used the term firm on a regular basis. Early skinhead identity was loose, unstructured, and dissolved quickly. Identity construction was tied to social gatherings and specific spaces that were relatively unregulated, and allowing for the innovation needed to create oppositional identities (Melucci 1996, 1989; Hirsch 1989). A long-time observer of the skinhead culture explained the formation of skinhead gangs as:

...pockets, it's hard to describe, you get a few people from an area and a few people from another. Huntington Beach had a core group that was probably among the larger at the time and they jell around the core group and go to crash pads here and go together and either party at that place or go out some place. Another scenario is they would agree to meet at a particular punk rock dance and develop ties during these events. (Law Enforcement Interview d., 1/22/99)

Eventually, skinheads went from individual youths seeking an edgy, extreme style to gangs organized around an ultra-aggressive posture. Skinhead gangs used ritual initiation rites to establish membership, such as “jump-ins” (Vigil 1988) where a prospective member’s “toughness” is “tested” by current members who encircle the new recruit and beat him for at least 30 seconds and sometimes up to a couple minutes. Music, style, drinking, fighting, and other non-descript delinquent activity were the most prominent interests of these early skinheads. A skinhead in Los Angeles County describes the days, or more importantly the nights, of skinhead gangs during the early 1980s,

at first mostly what we did was go to punk shows at the Olympic and fight, hell we’d get into fifty fights a night three or four nights a week with anybody who wanted to try us ...No we didn’t hang out with many skins in O.C. (Orange County), we’d see ‘em once in a while at shows and it’d be
like 'hey bro, see ya around' but that's about it we weren't in regular contact back then. (Skinhead Interview i., 7/16/99)

Despite the likely exaggeration of the number of fights per night, this comment reveals several important characteristics about the early skinhead gangs. First, most violence was not a product of a specified political agenda; other subcultural participants provided opportune targets who were often (although certainly not always) consensual participants in the violence. Second, contact between skinhead gangs was minimal; these groups included youths from a variety of areas that coalesced around a specific locale (even if it wasn't where they lived) and began identifying with that group. Despite this varied geographic distribution, neighborhood interests were important to the formation and persistence of skinhead gangs.

Reflecting a tradition of street gang culture that celebrates the marking of turf, skinhead gangs emulated these efforts albeit with much less success. The efforts to create a "territorial imperative" could be seen in the choice of skinhead gang names (e.g. Huntington Beach Skins, Chino Hills Skins, South Bay Skins, Norwalk Skins etc.). They also attempted to claim specific locations, such as parks by using graffiti "tags" and other more physically aggressive means. Consider the following description(s) of neighborhood "turf" and the treatment of perceived "outsiders" by Aaron, a Huntington Beach Skinhead:

INTERVIEWER: Do these names signify a territory they're claiming or just a name they're claiming?

SKINHEAD: Yeah South Bay that's over in L.A., Huntington that's over in Huntington, Chino Hills that's over in Chino...

INTERVIEWER: In regards to territory if someone from a rival gang comes into that territory do they protect that territory and how would they do that?

SKINHEAD: They tell 'em to leave only they wouldn't do it that kindly they'd usually beat that person up you know if it was someone from a gang
we didn’t like say if a LAD member came into the territory in Huntington Beach that LAD would get jumped. (Skinhead Interview h., 3/12/89)

and

One example was, one of the parks in town for a while, the skinheads were claiming it for territory and they’re just some regular kids [in the park], one of which had a plate in his head already. In the skinheads mind he committed a serious trespass, in reality they [the regular kids] were unable to protect themselves and they were easy targets so they [the skinheads] stomped them pretty good. (Law Enforcement Interview d., 1/17/99)

These examples reveal that the skinheads resembled other street gangs in many ways, including a penchant for expressive violence (Blee 2001; Yablonsky 1962) and a desire to claim geographic areas as turf. Yet, another collective interest that would distinguish skinheads was quickly gaining salience: the growing importance of race to skinheads signaled a change in the skinheads’ “racial formation” (Omi and Winnant 1994) from episodic to consistent racism. This transition did not happen overnight, instead, it necessitated internal struggle that led to subcultural schism and conscious efforts to realize the importance of race.

Localized Skinhead Gangs: the Growing Salience of Racial Identities

During the 1980s racial, religious, nationalist, and cultural identities grew in importance (Castells 1997; Bauman 1995). Skinheads embodied what Castells (1997) refers to as “territorial identity” prevalent among new urban social formations. “…Suddenly defenseless against a global whirlwind, people stuck to themselves: whatever they had, and whatever they were, became their identity…” (Castells 1997: 61). In a rapidly changing world where traditional boundaries were increasingly obsolete, skinhead gangs began to embrace race as an unshakeable marker. Race became their symbolic “el barrio,” although this type
of identity marker did not physically tie skinheads to a particular "block of street." Using race in this fashion provided greater physical mobility compared to traditional street gangs, but also presented important dilemmas regarding recruitment and organizational boundaries.

We don't understand the skinheads' organizational structure, a lot of their gangs pop up here one day, start recruiting, start to grow, commit a few crimes and then they're gone. This isn't like other gangs we're used to. They don't spend a lot of time on the corner throwing signs or doing business. They're not as visible like that. They keep a pretty low profile for the most part which helps them avoid us but they also have a hard time gaining numbers, it's hard for them to sustain their members or their stability. (Law Enforcement Interview b., 3/29/99)

The result has been a curious mixture of an identity grounded in a rigid adherence to a racial epistemology, while simultaneously embracing a subculture that is highly flexible and constantly changing. The remainder of this chapter will discuss the development of skinhead racism.

Narratives of Dispossession: Social Change and Racial Conflict

Growing racialization was primarily catalyzed by skinhead grievances that were themselves responses to changes occurring in the larger society. However, skinheads' "folk devil" (Cohen 1972) status has obscured some of the motivating factors that led to their increasing racialization, and has prevented a fuller understanding of the effects of these external forces on skinheads' racial sentiments. While research tends to portray skinheads as dominated by violent and irrational tendencies (cf Hamm 1993; Moore 1993), skinhead grievances and violence resemble a long tradition of "normative" racial conflict in the U.S.
Los Angeles skinhead gangs were reacting against a number of trends they felt threatened by. First, increasing immigration was significantly altering California’s demographics. Initially the skinhead response to these changes bore great resemblance to the kinds of conflict that ethnic/racial migration spurred in New York and other large urban centers only a few decades earlier (Schneider 1999; Suttles 1968). As Schneider explains regarding New York gangs:

After World War II, the massive expansion of African-American and Puerto Rican communities redefined these conflicts, created unity among Euro-American groups around their “whiteness” and focused resentment on the newcomers...while efforts by African-Americans to integrate New York’s schools in the 1950s led to boycotts and threats of violence by Euro-American parents. (1999: P. 9)

Just a few decades later, a Huntington Beach Skinhead described in similar fashion the conflict between skinheads and “nonwhites”:

The blacks we don’t like the blacks, we get along with some Chicanos, we don’t like the Iranians the Pakistanis, Afghanistanis, we don’t like people...these immigrants coming to our country that’s who we’re against...we didn’t want them here, get them out if they moved into our neighborhood we encouraged them to leave and they usually did...we would burn crosses uh Molotov cocktails whatever it took. (Skinhead Interview h., 3/12/89, [referring to the mid-1980s])

Other skinheads echo the effect of immigration on skinhead formation:

Skinheads were generated by the third world immigration, the skinhead movement is the voice from the street and trying to win their streets back....(Skinhead Interview t., 1986)
You had all these beaners and other muds coming in here and we didn't have a chance, jobs that should have been filled by white Americans were getting taken away and given to illegals under the table....(Skinhead Interview i., 99)

[Orange County] was still predominantly white when I was a kid but my parents moved out here in 73 from Chicago and it was pretty white you know. It was right about the time they started shipping boat loads of Vietnamese refugees over here and then the Hispanics, illegal aliens started coming up in droves and you saw the neighborhoods, crime free white areas go to non-white cesspools. (Skinhead Interview I., 3/17/02)

These statements express the social and economic anxiety and the subsequent scapegoating that immigration waves often produce. Yet, skinhead perceptions of this “social problem” were not monolithic. The HB Skinhead expressed a certain level of “tolerance” for “some Chicanos,” while the American Front Skinhead puts Hispanics (“beaners”) at the top of his “shit list.” This reveals that skinhead ideology has important variations and is not completely homogenous. In a city where Hispanic gangs greatly outnumber white ones, those white gangs that “tolerate” Hispanics are far more likely to develop ties and even alliances with a Hispanic gang. This interaction may eventually result in a “cross-over” of membership. What is most curious about these types of relationships is that they do not necessarily spell an end to an allegiance to white supremacist beliefs.

For example, in the city and surrounding areas of La Mirada (located in southern Los Angeles County), the white supremacist skinhead gang, La Mirada Punk (LMP) began as a multi-cultural gang (primarily white and Hispanic with a couple black members). However, as racism became a stable feature of the gang, the black members were purged (although one who is in a leadership position remains), but Hispanic members were never removed.
Today, LMP remains an active white supremacist gang with links to various other skinhead gangs (some of whom maintain a strict “whites only” policy of membership) and yet retains one black leader and a membership that is 40 percent Hispanic (Law Enforcement Interview i., 5/11/02).

Second, skinhead gangs provided refuge and protection from other subcultures. This perceived need for protection also resulted from larger structural changes. Similar to increasing immigration, skinhead gangs crystalized around the anxiety-provoking policies surrounding busing, shifting neighborhood composition, and minority street gangs (see Moore 1991). Each of these were perceived to contribute toward heightened inter-racial hostility and minority-generated aggression directed at white youths.

It's first generation that's really the first large scale generation that had to grow up in these inner city schools. The gangs are beating them, robbing them, raping them. The school authorities are making excuses but if the whites turn around against the blacks or the Mexicans then it's a hate crime. So the white kids are saying shit, nowhere to turn, the parents wouldn't even listen to them, so they turned to people that would listen to them, cause we were there. (Interview Tom Metzger 2/26/99)

Edward, a WAR Skin, offers his thoughts on the role of inter-racial conflict:

In my opinion non-white street gangs led to the rise of non-affiliated (independent) skinheads. Many whites growing up in gang afflicted areas become victims. After being victimized or feeling as if you are, it's not a huge step to begin to hate that tormentor and to soon begin to hate his whole race....(Skinhead Interview n., 9/10/02)

This comment articulates sentiments widely shared among skinheads. Narratives depict these threats in a range of forms. Some of these stories use direct personal experience to illustrate how these threats immediately affected their safety and health, while others
express these threats in relatively abstract terms. The former uses a “victim” status to help
explain the necessity of skinhead gangs. From this vantage point, skinheads may be per­
ceived as not only necessary, but a rational response to an environment that violates white
youths on the basis of skin color. For example,

It sucked [living in South Gate, L.A. County], virtually every day I would
get in a fight. There was a group of Mexicans in the neighborhood that I
would have to pass by their house where they would all hang out every day
on my way home and to and from school, and they would always give me a
bunch of shit. ‘Hey white boy,’ this this this, take your bike, and I would
end up fighting every day. It sucked you know....(Skinhead Interview j., 6/
16/02)

or

I wasn’t really prejudiced necessarily, except when I was getting in a fight of
course, in seventh grade I went to, I was living in La Habra [Orange County]
and like I said I wasn’t necessarily racial then but there was a lot of fights
constantly with the Mexicans and there were niggers there too you know.
Of course when you get into a fight it comes out, ‘fuck you niggers,’ you
know, ‘fuck you beaners,’ you know, they are calling you ‘white boys,
fucking honky, white trash,’ Yeah, there was a lot of fighting, the white kids
that ganged up on the fucken beaners were punk rockers back then. Punk
rockers were at the local high school and they would come down and they
would get into fights with the Mexican gangs, they would be stabbing each
other and all that kind of shit you know what I mean. (Skinhead Interview
q., 7/22/01)

In another instance a skinhead explains his “racial awakening” in relation to how he saw
his white peers at school treated:
I was barely 15 years old, white kids and white youth were being harassed...and all the black music, the rap music and break dancing was in and everybody wanted to be Negro. They [white kids] were ashamed of their heritage, they were ashamed to be white you know and I just rejected all that, 'hey I'm proud of my heritage and I'm proud to be white.' I was the extreme opposite of what all these other white kids were doing and they were cowering and they had no spines, it was my way of rebelling against the liberal society. (Skinhead Interview 1., 3/17/02)

Some observers may dismiss these claims as simply “racist propaganda” without any bearing on reality. For example, one former probation officer with expertise regarding skinhead gangs argued that these claims were only excuses fueled after skinheads developed ties with white supremacist organizations. According to this officer, skinheads concocted these “stories” to rationalize their views of racial hatred. However, this ignores a tradition of “white” narratives that bespeak of very similar experiences of “racial victimization”. As the intellectual Irving Horowitz recalls during his days of growing up in New York during the 1940s:

We never walked through the side streets of Harlem. We ran. Only along the main thoroughfares...did we dare pause to walk” — “Interracial fights were nearly a daily after-school occurrence until his parents finally decided to move to Brooklyn. (quoted in Schneider 1999: Pp. 35-36).

Unlike the probation officer above, another skinhead gang specialist viewed the issue of minority street gangs and racial turmoil as important to the formation of skinhead gangs:

Both of those [minority street gangs and racial conflict at school] were influential in developing the skinheads, we had other gangs here in town, we had a quasi-Crip gang, some of the [skinhead] motivations were revenge against these gangs. That's a common thing you see in school these days, the racial aspect. The gangs were not on the scale of LA by any means but
they were enough to help with the genesis of the skinheads here... the kids already in gangs would go to school and see all the nice stuff they had and beat up the white kids, not that the white kids didn't provoke it. (Law Enforcement Interview d., 1/29/99)

Regardless of the accuracy of the stories depicting racial antagonism and violence directed toward white youth, these narratives offer a powerful framework for explaining why some individuals embraced the skinheads. From this perspective, the formation of skinhead gangs was defensive in nature. “We [skinheads] were like a defense mechanism, you had all these nons [nonwhites] moving in all over southern California and we got sick of it, we saw everything our parents worked for going down the shitter, right down the fucking drain” (Skinhead Interview a., 8/13/00). While the media fueled fears about the threat of Los Angeles street gangs (see Moore 1991), other sources of threat were circulated through word-of-mouth networks and other informal channels of communication. This resembles Turner and Killian's (1972) discussion of “rumor” which characterized communication in collective behavior. Rumor circulates information and is “the process through which emergent norms develop to give direction to the activities of the collectivity” (P. 32). White youths used personal experiences, first-hand observation, and information channeled through rumor to assess potential risk factors, which in turn informed their decisions about strategies for “self-defense”. This process was not purely intellectual, but was significantly affected by strong emotional tides as well. Rumor provided information along with an emotional framework to interpret it. Stories about a “gang” of black students beating a lone white student are more than “neutral” descriptions; they have an intended emotional referent that makes the stories far more powerful.

Skinhead Organizational Characteristics

In contrast to some research which argues that skinhead gangs are largely unorganized (Moore 1993), a more accurate characterization that reflects the complexity of skinhead
organization is captured by the notion of labile. This term refers to social groupings whose membership fluctuates frequently, creating relationships between members that are characterized by fleeting associations and collage-like identities (Moore 1994). Skinheads form and re-form their relationships as these dissolve quickly. This pattern of association is characterized by clusters of close relationships amidst a sea of weaker ties, some of which are “bridging” and thus provide links between clusters. These clusters are what maintain the skinhead identity and solidarity to interests that transcend specific group formations.

“Weak ties” (Granovetter 1973) describe the links in a network that are not rigidly bounded and maintain fluid participation. These ties provide access to a wide array of information and available resources through people beyond one’s “inner circle”. The lack of loyalty that tends to typify “weak ties” provides subcultures with an important component in terms of longevity of groups. While weak ties may prevent greater cohesion, they also diffuse conflicts. When a conflict occurs in a subculture marked by intense and strong ties, people are forced to “take sides” as there is little room for “fence sitting,” but with groups marked by weak ties, conflicts can be resolved through more creative resolutions that are possible due to adaptability. For example, a gang like La Mirada Punk that is racist in ideology, but multi-cultural in membership creates spaces where racist discourse is acceptable and other spaces where racist discourse is prohibited. Although members are not tightly bound together nor are they especially loyal to each other, this flexibility seems to be an effective organizational characteristic as the gang has existed for close to two decades.

Skinhead core beliefs have grown unevenly precisely because of the widespread and decentralized development of skinhead groups (Moore 1993). Far from homogenous, skinhead gangs constitute a widely diverse subculture with varying interests. Yet, inclusion in the subculture is a bond that ties otherwise disparate organizational forms together. The mere act of defining oneself as a racist skinhead creates linkages, irrespective of other specificities. Similarly, the spaces shared by different skinhead organizations allow for the
development of friendship ties that often prove stronger than the desire for ideological continuity. In some cases, a single skinhead gang may represent this significant diversity by drawing members from incongruent organizations and even disparate demographic backgrounds. For example, the skinhead gang Crossfire was formed by renegades from several other skinhead gangs including the South Bay Skinheads, the WAR Skins, and the American Front. The first wave of Crossfire started around 1992 and had about 40 skinheads, while the second wave had about a dozen members. One of the key leaders, “Spider” was “half black” and a former South Bay Skinhead, however Crossfire members later accused him of theft and scraped his tattoos off with a razor after severely beating him. After that, African-Americans were no longer allowed in the gang. Crossfire was ninety percent white, and the remaining members were Hispanic. Most of the Crossfire members went to prison in 1994 after a “slew of random violence that finally caught up to us” (Skinhead Interview t. 8/03/00). After being released from prison in 1998, two of the core members tried to reorganize Crossfire. They recruited several skinhead youths, each of whom received Crossfire tattoos, however, several leaders were sentenced to prison following an incident of gang violence that resulted in attempted murder charges. Shortly after this, Crossfire disbanded.

Despite some skinhead efforts at creating a territorial imperative, they were much less successful than traditional street gangs, where sentiments attached to turf sometimes extend across two or three generations (Moore 1993). As one skinhead characterized this issue: “For a while, skins did some of the gang territory thing, but we quickly realized that a more political stance was more effective and could help us achieve our goals and that fighting over some street you don’t even own is pretty stupid (Skinhead Interview a., 2/19/99). Seth refers to a process of politicization that seemed to mitigate the need or desire for territory, offering the powerful possibility of identifying with a globally united Aryan race. His comment also reveals the importance of structural constraints and the effects these have on group formation. Part and parcel of skinhead politicization was a growing
racialization: a worldview where racism was not simply “common sense,” but part of an intricate explanation of the social world. As skinheads became politicized, their identity became more structured and their racism radicalized. In this sense, race was propelled to the core of the skinhead identity, serving as a symbolic anchor. Over time, the centrality of race resulted in a transition from various forms of style as identity markers toward a committed form of “lifestyle politics”. This transition dialectically combined skinhead involvement in traditional political activism (marches, rallies, etc.) and increasing racial antagonism.

Early skinhead gangs contained the seeds for both political and economic gangs, as racism and Nazism existed, but was far more episodic. Over time, race changed from an implicit and loosely guarded reservoir to an explicit and narrowly defined identity marker. In addition, some early skinhead gangs were involved in illegal drug use and smalltime distribution, while others were involved in a whole host of non-specialized criminal activities (e.g. petty theft, burglaries). Eventually these elements developed into relatively organization criminal enterprises.

In this chapter I discuss the first phase in the early formation of skinheads and their genesis toward social gangs, which began around 1978 and lasted until about 1984. I argue that stylistic interests were the primary impetus for the first skinheads. The Hardcore punk trend and punk gangs influenced the transition from style to social gangs, where skinheads were bonder by organizational affiliations, ritual initiation rites, and participation in non-specialized criminal activity. Skinhead social gangs protected their turf and engaged in a pattern of conflict with other gangs, law enforcement, and the general community. From the beginning, whiteness was important to skinhead identity but not their raison d'être. Early skinheads emphasized the importance of “subcultural affiliation” which was informed by a broader notion of ethnic/racial suitability for participation. While early skinhead gangs incorporated some elements of racism, many also included Hispanic members and occasionally an African-American member. During the first phase, skinheads
held a range of racial views, but one of the most important was the perception that white youth needed to defend themselves from minority street gangs. This perception would help facilitate the transition toward skinhead political gangs that I discuss in the next chapter.
Notes

1 This discussion of punk is not intended to be comprehensive as I am only emphasizing certain aspects that are related to the skinheads. For research that concentrates on the punks see Hebdige 1979; Dancis 1978; Marcus 1989.

2 See Wood 1999 for a similar argument regarding the emergence of the skinhead phenomenon across North America.

3 This style typically includes creased Khakis or denim jeans (a hold over from detention center clothing), plaid dress shirts sometimes worn with only the top buttons fastened, white t-shirts, pants are often worn “baggie style” also known as “sagging,” and sometimes bandannas or hairnets are worn over the head (see Vigil 1988: 109-113).

4 The topic of the “Suicidals” like punk gangs in general is worthy of a study specifically focusing on this topic. The Suicidals first developed in Los Angeles County and were multi-ethnic, however another Suicidal set developed in Orange County (OCST) and were exclusively white and extremely racist. Interestingly though they were also extremely anti-skinhead and in frequent conflict with various skinhead gangs.

5 For research on the NF see Billig 1978.
This chapter analyzes skinhead politicization, a phase spanning from 1983-1994. By politics, I mean the use of intrigue or strategy to gain power. The transitional process toward the use of politics is what I refer to as politicization, which includes adopting a set of political ideas that were expressed through new forms of talk (e.g. the ZOG discourse) and participation in various types of political activism (e.g. marches, leafleting, and rallies). Politicization diminished the importance of previous interests such as territoriality, by introducing relatively abstract notions of space (e.g. state power as opposed the neighbor-
hood) (Brotherton 1999). I argue that politicization stemmed from two sources: (1) internal changes in the skinhead subculture and (2) external network links to adult white supremacist organizations (e.g., White Aryan Resistance (WAR), Aryan Nations (AN), Ku Klux Klan). These sources helped generate one of the skinhead subculture's most important changes: the increasing salience of race as a core component of members' identity. The culmination of this process was an indigenous organizational development: the Hammerskin Nation (HN). Changes in organizational form also corresponded with new racialized political practices. I conclude this chapter with a discussion of the damaging criminal and civil trials that targeted the White Aryan Resistance (WAR) in 1988 and 1989. Along with policing efforts, these trials ultimately encouraged a type of "strategic abeyance" (Simi and Futrell 2002) where skinheads maintained ideological allegiance and network relations without highly visible public displays of activism. I argue that this move toward covert resistance remains a potent strategy for sustaining collective identity, but with important limitations for public-level mobilization.

As I illustrate in chapter 4, the early skinheads were stylistic innovators directly tied to the punk subculture. Influenced by Hardcore, punk gangs, and a splintering punk subculture in the late 1970s and early 1980s, skinheads became an increasingly distinct subcultural formation. Skinhead subcultural autonomy led to the formation of social gangs, not unlike some of the white gangs of the 1950s in New York, Chicago and Los Angeles that coalesced around the desire to defend "racial territories" (Schneider 1999; Davis 1993; Short and Strodtbeck 1976; Suttles 1968'). It is possible that had skinheads never encountered adult white supremacist organizations, they would have remained white gangs that were comparable to the history of gang conflict infused with racial antagonism. Like these earlier white gangs, the skinhead's sense of racial territoriality was initially a result of local struggles and did not include a broader interest in national or global affairs.

Beginning in the mid 1980s, skinhead racism began changing from episodic to consistent and within a couple years this change had become pervasive. Along with changes in
skinhead racism, claims to local territory were becoming irrelevant as organizations such as White Aryan Resistance nurtured a “Pan-Aryan” philosophy that concentrated upon racial boundaries as opposed to geographic ones. The wide-scale adoption of the name “WAR Skins” reflected skinhead gangs’ de-territorialization, as WAR Skins were active in multiple counties across Southern California. Related to this de-territorialization, skinheads discovered the “ZOG discourse” (Kaplan and Bjorgo 1998). This new ideological current was a major impact in creating a new racial formation, which sought to link racial activists across the globe by a unity belief in a Zionist conspiracy to wipe out the white race. This ideological change partly included embracing Nazism, a move that helped catalyze skinhead political activism. During the initial formation of skinhead gangs, race was situationally important. When local neighborhood boundaries were crossed, skinheads drew upon racist sentiments to enforce a racial status quo built upon a local and national tradition of visible segregation in Los Angeles and across the United States (Tischauser 2002; Bonilla-Silva 2001; Davis 1993). Although race was clearly important, it had yet to become a “collective action frame” (Snow and Benford 1992: 138) that provided a clear identification of problems and whom to direct grievances toward.

As racism became central to the skinhead identity, skinheads became less concerned with claiming territory. Skinheads were building a collective identity that extended beyond the local neighborhood, and increasingly rested upon a globalizing racial discourse epitomized by the theory of ZOG. For some skinheads this translated into support for creating a white homeland (e.g. the Northwest Imperative), while others embraced relatively abstract “utopian” visions of a “race war, racial cleansing, and death to ZOG.” Skinhead gangs concretized these ideas with “catchy” slogans emblazoned on pamphlets and stickers including: “White Revolution is the only Solution” and “Get Out! Jew Pig!” (Anti-Defamation League 1988). Still other skinheads felt a large-scale, non-violent “white resistance” that abolished affirmative action, gay rights, and other programs associated with liberal, multi-cultural ideals would at least stem the tide. Brotherton’s (1999) study of
politicization among New York City gangs also notes how politicization alters the salience of a gang's interests: "As they build their organizations into nations, the pertinence of parochial boundaries is lessened. As a result, the members and leadership tend to have a much broader vision of their organization's aims" (84).

The increasing virulence of skinhead racism marked the transition from social gangs to political gangs. The emerging ties between skinhead gangs and older white supremacist organizations helped facilitate this change. With this in mind, I aim to answer the following questions in this chapter: how did the skinheads become politicized? More specifically, what were the factors that enabled politicization and what were the effects of politicization on the skinhead subculture? As discussed in chapter 2, the politicization of gang subcultures is a relatively unexplored question.

By the mid 1980s, skinhead gangs were becoming increasingly political, a trend which included a radicalization of their racism. As a result, skinhead gangs began a process of "racial purging," and of narrowing what constitutes whiteness. As racism became a consistent element of the skinhead identity, the few black skinheads and the slightly larger number of Hispanic skinheads and other "non-white" skinheads were "asked to leave." Skinheads became increasingly aware of and sensitive to consolidating gangs around a narrower conception of whiteness. Purges coincided with increasing contact between skinheads and domestic and international white supremacist groups as well as changes in skinhead beliefs. Skinheads justified the purges as a rational choice resulting from negative experiences with minorities, leading to a realization that minorities were simply not suitable to affiliate with.

However, the purges were never completed entirely and they raised questions about the efficacy of restricting the pool of potential recruits by narrowing the racial criteria for membership. Purging also resulted in asking core members to exit because of new rigid membership guidelines, yet the bonds of pre-existing relations were often stronger than the
impetus to “purify” the ranks. For example, in the summer of 1987, a *Los Angeles Times* article featured the Huntington Beach Skins (HB Skins), who were quoted as saying,

We’re American children. We’re not wetbacks or blacks or nothing like that...we formed because we wanted some unity. We don’t like people invading our territory. When you live in HB (Huntington Beach), it's considered more high-class than Long Beach and stuff and a lot of gangs come down here and want to move in on us. We write our name on a wall and they cross us out. That’s when it starts (quoted in the *Los Angeles Times*, 1/30/87).

Ironically, one of their core members, “Pee Wee” was Hispanic, a holdover from the days when skinhead gangs were accepting of some Hispanic members. Huntington Beach Skins had purged several other Hispanics, but “Pee Wee” was a long-time member and a leader. His heritage was overlooked in order for the HB Skins to maintain a semblance of group unity.

The Transition toward Politics, 1984-1989

Typically, the skinhead transition toward racist politics is explained as part of a fascist conspiracy to infiltrate white youth culture (see Wood 1999). Proponents of this view argue that until far-right political organizations made a concerted effort to recruit them, the skinheads were unremarkable in terms of racial sentiments. Accordingly, fascist organizations used youths who were already far-right adherents and “planted” them in the punk and skinhead scene, instructing them to recruit others who might be attracted to a racist program. This account bears remarkable resemblance to the theory of “outside agitators” that was used to explain the emergence of the Civil Rights Movement and more recently the growth and diffusion of urban street gangs (Hagedorn 1988). For example, Skinheads Against Racial Prejudice (SHARPs) argue, “racists are a splinter group who pervert the skinhead way of life” (Wood 1999:139).
The explanation of outside agitators and "untrue" skinheads implies greater distance between racists and anti-racists gangs than actually exists (Blazak and Wooden 2001). Further, this explanation also ignores the evidence suggesting that high levels of tolerance toward different skinhead factions marked the skinhead subculture. During this time, their most important characteristic was shared subcultural affiliation. Interestingly, as discussed in chapter four, my research indicates that one of the first anti-racist skinhead gangs in Los Angeles was a splinter from the Northside Firm, which was a gang that combined a variety of racial sentiments, including racist beliefs. The splintering of the Northside Firm produced a host of branches, some of which were political and racist and others that struggled against racism.

Opponents of racist skinheads may find comfort in explanations that attribute this phenomenon to individuals outside of their respective communities. While bits and pieces of these accounts may have some truth, they are over-simplistic. Further, these explanations ignore the relationship between external and internal group dynamics, resulting in mechanistic theories of racial formation. My approach emphasizes the complexity of subcultural development and the effects of both internal and external dynamics on the mobilization of racial sentiments.

By the mid-1980s, the skinhead subculture was changing and many skinhead gangs were taking a "political turn." This process of politicization included subcultural changes in terms of beliefs, practices, and organizational form. During this time, various larger and adult-based white supremacist organizations began recruiting skinheads (Dobratz and Shanks-Meile 1997). Some claim this strategy reflected more established organizations' hopes to use skinheads as "foot soldiers" in the "battle to save the white race" (Intelligence Report 1997; ADL 1995, 1989). However, skinhead gangs did not universally agree that a close relationship with white supremacist organizations was the most appropriate route. Some skinhead gangs viewed these efforts as manipulative, while others were uninterested in participating in traditional political activism (e.g. leafleting, marches etc). Nonetheless,
many skinhead gangs developed ties with domestic and international white supremacist organizations, and such alliances constitute a crucial milestone in the career of skinhead gangs.

Early Los Angeles skinheads were stylistic innovators. Like skinheads all over the globe, they were influenced by the cultural diffusion generated by a British youth style. During the initial formation, international links were almost exclusively the province of isolated attempts at using the skinhead style to create a new and different signature within a stagnant punk scene. Individual youths would hear about the "new" style in England from friends who had just returned from the U.K. to California or more frequently, would see a British skinhead band's album cover in a music "zine" depicting the skinhead style (see also Moore 1994; Moore 1993). Although organizations or groups with a specific political intention did not purposefully engineer these encounters, these elements provided seeds that were necessary for the skinheads' move from a stylistic trend to social gangs.

Experimentation with new styles led to conflicts with other subcultural participants and authorities, each of which served to reinforce the allure of the skinhead identity. Like Hagedorn's (1988) study of African-American gangs in Milwaukee who began as breakdancing groups, skinhead gangs started as youths who coalesced around Hardcore music and the social spaces where live music shows occurred. The fierce rivalries that developed among these break-dancing groups emerged as a result of the fights that often occurred after dancing competitions. Skinheads fought with punks and each other, which helped them achieve a sense of purpose beyond stylistic experimentation. Such conflict produced an awareness of the distinction between "us" and "them" and developed a sense of solidarity. While Hagedorn's gangs were born on the street corner where "break-offs" typically took place, skinhead gangs were born in the venues that allowed these Hardcore bands to play. This difference helps explain the skinhead's tendency toward transience. These venues were often closed down and the consistency of shows varied greatly. There was little available space for skinheads to adopt as their own, leaving many to wander about
looking for other pockets of skinheads and the next music show. Despite this instability, skinhead gangs attempted to claim turf in their local neighborhoods such as parks and other hangouts.

Eventually, as enough southern California youth (although still a relatively small minority) experimented with this style, the skinhead became a recognized fixture in the punk subculture. By the early 1980s, skinheads were no longer isolated pockets submerged within the punk subculture; but had emerged as a distinct subculture of social gangs. If the transition from stylistic innovation to social gangs marked a significant change, the skinhead gangs were about to experience another important development. Soon skinheads would become known for more than their shaved head and aggressive dancing, they would become unequivocally associated with far-right politics and an explicit endorsement of neo-Nazism. Exactly how did this transition occur and was this transition pervasive, as many observers claim, or was it only partial? Did all of the skinhead gangs that came to embrace explicit racism and elements of neo-Nazism also embrace political activism? Was the radicalization of skinhead racism synonymous with becoming political or are these separate processes? If these processes are autonomous, in what ways are they linked together?

International Links

The concept of "linkage" provides insight regarding the concrete ties that influenced the generation of political skinhead gangs. Weinberg (1998) uses this concept in his explanation for the recent revival of adult right-wing extremism in Western Europe and the United States. Linkage includes two components, emulation and penetration. Emulation involves a group or organization in one country copying the name, style, strategies and organizational structure of an organization in another country. No direct communication need take place for emulation to occur. Emulation bears resemblance to stylistic innovation, except that it includes a purposive political intent that innovation does not. Examples
of emulation include American groups adopting neo-Nazism or European racists designating their group as the Ku Klux Klan. Penetration involves direct contact between members of groups from different countries. Examples include Tom Metzger's visits with the British National Front or more recently the German white power music band, Radikal's "tour" of the U.S. where they spent time associating with the Aryan Nations, Hammerskins and various other American white supremacist organizations (Simi and Brents 2002). Resulting from either emulation or penetration, linkage depends upon conscious efforts in order to stimulate greater mobilization or organization.

While penetration was less common than emulation during the 1980s, in recent years, this pattern has begun to change, with decreasing costs of international communication. Today, skinhead organizations from countries across the globe are able to consistently communicate with each other via the Internet, faxes, cell phones, and face-to-face contact.

In the mid 1980s, as Southern California skinheads became increasingly familiar with the connection between British skinheads and the National Front, they began emulating the National Front's politics. The British racist skinhead band, Skrewdriver, was one of the most important mediums that presented National Front politics. Skrewdriver was a household name among Los Angeles skinheads and their articulation of racist politics and neo-fascism was unequivocal with song titles like "Nigger, Nigger." Skrewdriver provided a model for southern California skinheads who saw the band's open denouncement of foreign immigration and fearless affirmation of whiteness as refreshingly bold.

...I remember the first time I heard Skrewdriver, every skinhead can tell you about that, it was a bootleg of a bootleg of a bootleg, the sound wasn't worth shit, but it was still magical, it was instantaneous - you felt something, you could hear the pride in his voice...after that, we all wanted to be like Skrewdriver, we really started paying closer to the political aspects you know not just the style and music; that was only part of it. We realized that
we needed to start educating ourselves more about National Socialism and our white heritage....(Skinhead Interview k., 7/14/00)

Los Angeles skinheads’ desire to model themselves after their British counterparts also influenced their selection of “enemies” and organizational names. As Los Angeles skinheads began developing a consistent set of racist beliefs and practices, they borrowed one of the British skinheads’ most widely known characteristics: “distaste” for Pakistanis (Hebdige 1979). By the mid-1980s when Los Angeles skinheads were asked about their grievances, they often referred to the “problem” of Pakistanis:

We’re here to save our land from all this nonwhite invasion...they’re pouring the Pakis in and the niggers and trying to mix all the colors. (Skinhead Interview u., 1986)

and

They’re coming from everywhere and it makes me sick to see it, I just get sick...the spics, niggers, the Pakis, all of ‘em just keep comin.’ (Skinhead Interview t., 1986)

White racism in the United States is typically associated with anti-black sentiments (Blazak and Wooden 2001; Blee 1996; Wellman 1993). While this has certainly been the case in southern California (Davis 1990), the large proportion of Hispanics has also meant that they too become a target of white racism (Almaguer 1994). Yet, skinheads were routinely mentioning “Pakis” in addition to these other more familiar “foes”. Although this may seem relatively insignificant, it reveals that skinheads were borrowing an ideological facet that otherwise had little direct relevance in their own lives, and using it to support notions of a “non-white invasion”. This ability to make sense of and use “foreign” ideological trends was especially helpful when skinheads were introduced to the “theory” of ZOG.

Blee (2002) argues that when racists become active in the white supremacy movement, they have little previous knowledge regarding anti-Semitism. Since the ZOG theory is premised on the idea that an international “cabal” of Jews intend to eradicate the white
race, less ideologically-experienced skinheads needed to learn how to interpret rapid social changes, that at times, seemed to disfavor middle and working-class white males as a result of a "Zionist conspiracy". Skinheads’ ability to incorporate the ZOG myth into their repertoire proved an important development in their growing politicization. Thus, borrowing the British Skinheads’ resentment of “Pakis” helped prepare skinheads for their later adoption of ZOG. As a former skinhead explains it, the eventual adoption of the ZOG myth facilitated by their hatred against various groups: “By the time most of us found out about ZOG, we were already so angry and filled with hate, it made sense to extend it some more and start really focusing on the so-called root of evil you know, we ate it up…” (Skinhead Interview c., 6/25/02).

Another example of the Los Angeles skinheads’ emulation of the British skinheads was their usage of the term “firm.” Some of the British skinheads used this term to identify themselves as followers of particular soccer clubs. In some cases, these firms were associated with the widely publicized acts of “hooligan” violence (Buford 1992). Similar to the punk gangs that formed around music bands, British skinhead gangs often formed around sports teams (Moore 1993). With a U.S. sporting culture that had little resemblance to England’s, Los Angeles skinheads adopted the term, but emphasized its subcultural aspect, and tied it directly to skinhead life. “Oh yeah, back then the firm thing from England was the big thing, everyone wanted to name their group like that, you know, Northside Firm, American Firm…” (Skinhead Interview d., 4/17/01). Again, we see how Los Angeles skinheads imported and emulated facets of the British skinhead culture.

Although direct contact with international sources was less frequent, there were some important exceptions. Contacts with international white supremacist groups were intentional efforts to mobilize youth and helped skinheads organize around racial politics. These contacts solidified the emulative efforts of skinhead gangs by providing face-to-face relations and practical advice on organizational issues. For example, the following is a description of how a collection of racist punks and skinheads mutated into the American
In the spring of 1984, at a house party in West Covina (southeastern Los Angeles County), a recruiter from Britain’s National Front Party and Bob Heick, the organizer of San Francisco’s American Front, encouraged local youths to organize a southern Californian-based American Front (AF). Shortly thereafter, about twenty punks and skinheads in Los Angeles County began holding regular meetings as well as adopting uniforms to identify their new organizational affiliation. Not completely original, the American Front began wearing brown shirts to mark their presence. The affiliation with the National Front helped these skinheads re-orient themselves to a new organizational model.

That’s what got us all thinking we needed to do something...when we talked with the recruiter from the NF, he gave us, talked to us about ideas on how to get new members involved and how to organize ourselves. He helped direct us in the ways of fascism, I mean we were already racial, but none of us knew much about politics or anything and when the NF sat down and talked with us, he stressed reading Hitler, learning about European history that kind of thing...(Skinhead Interview i., 8/9/99)

Troy’s description reveals how international links helped forge new identities that expressed the importance of integrating racial and political sentiments. Simply rebelling through style and music were no longer considered enough. Further, international contacts were helping Los Angeles skinheads learn to incorporate European-born elements such as Nazism to expand their organizational interests. Skinheads used these lessons to re-define their interest in race beyond local or even national borders, an effort that became critical to the organization of political gangs. The National Front advised these skinheads and warned about the destructive potential that “non-white” immigration poses for national and racial “integrity”. “They told us what happened over there [the U.K.] with all the fuckin’ Pakis...and that we needed to fight off the illegals over here” (Skinhead Interview i., 8/9/99).
Early organizers of the AF indicate that a rapid increase in non-white populations, such as Hispanics (via immigration) and African-Americans (via school busing programs) devastated what was previously a predominantly white working and middle-class "enclave." According these accounts, such an increase led to a proliferation of "non-white" gangs and other social problems, leaving white youths little choice but to organize themselves as proto-typical vigilantes committed to "cleaning up their community."

In that a major increase of multi cultural integration, we get the riots in '68 and before that we get multi cultural relationships, black and white people getting together, you know, free love, you know love is blind, this shit...so something had to be done, we couldn't keep having that kinda shit everywhere so we started organizing, we met with the NF [National Front] and listened to their ideas and started having our own meetings, talking about what we needed to do around our community to get things cleaned up...We would see people spray painting we would beat them up and then we would get it off the wall...we were dealing with the minor crimes, spray painting, graffiti, gang fights....(Skinhead Interview p., 6/21/00)

While these social changes Josh mentions made many people uncomfortable, most did not actively pursue efforts to counter them. Josh offers a glimpse at one of the factors crucial to understanding how the American Front became politicized. The British National Front served as a mentor to these Angelino youth, helping them realize the potential that collective action holds in confronting social forces. Holding certain ideas or grievances is itself not enough to generate collective action (McCarthy and Zald 1973). Network ties have consistently been shown to be one of the most significant factors in explaining how individuals come to participate in social movement activity (McAdam 1988, 1982; Snow, Zurcher, and Ekland-Olsen 1980). The direct international contacts that helped build these networks may have been infrequent, but the British National Front's efforts were
aided by the music of *Skrewdriver*. This indirect international contact helped crystallize the National Front's politics for a younger generation across the Atlantic.

We started listening to bands like *Skrewdriver*. We'd listen to the music. It was extremely violent and it was about white power. So that was our influence and then other racial groups started giving us literature and we just adopted the white power philosophy and started kicking the Hispanic kids out of the group. And then our targets became the minority gangs - Mexican gangs and black gangs. (Skinhead Interview j., 3/22/01)

This quote illustrates Los Angeles skinheads' emulation of the British skinheads through the medium of music bands, such as Skrewdriver. International culture and organizations encouraged political formation, which in turn led skinheads to sharpen their focus on race.

**Domestic Links**

Far more predominant than international links during the mid and late 1980s, network ties to the U.S. white supremacy movement provided skinheads with invaluable political socialization. Before forging these ties, skinhead gangs were racist, but not politically active. For example, the Order Skins embraced a racist ideology, but never participated in any traditional forms of political activity. By 1984, the Order Skins' numbers were growing through the consolidation of other smaller skinhead gangs, yet remained primarily concerned with claiming turf and fighting rival gangs. However, their organizational strength quickly began to weaken as much of their core membership splintered due to drug use and incarceration. As a core member who avoided these problems described it, "all the older guys were getting busted, going to prison, getting into drugs, things just started to fall apart and go in directions that we didn't want to be part of..." (Skinhead Interview o., 11/17/02).

In the wake of a crumbling infrastructure, several Order Skins were trying to develop a new organization. Before the Order Skins completely fragmented, one member received
White Aryan Resistance (WAR) literature on his family's front porch. His family's home, like all of the other homes in the area were flooded by a WAR literature drive. A dialogue about WAR's political agenda ensued between a few of these Order Skins and soon they arranged a meeting with Tom Metzger in Fallbrook (just south of Los Angeles). In this instance, WAR's recruiting effort was successful; in 1986, these skinheads began to organize themselves under a new banner and with the direct assistance from WAR. They called themselves the WAR Skins and were based around the cities of Orange, Fullerton, and Anaheim.

The emergence of the WAR Skins marked a turning point in the skinhead subculture. The insularity that typified earlier skinhead gangs had given way to a trend toward links between skinhead gangs and adult white supremacist organizations. This was a major accomplishment, as struggles ensued between both sides challenged the efficacy of this relationship. Some skinheads felt that a relationship with WAR or other white supremacist organizations would lead to internal conflict and division among skinheads:

You know one thing that pisses me off about the Skinhead Movement in the last few years is that my comrades are all sucking up to these 'Movement Politicians'. I'm talking about people like Metzger, Butler, Miles, etc...! That is causing a lot of stupid turmoil between Skins because of influence from these older Racists who have been fighting each other over stupid reasons for years. (California skinhead quoted in Kaplan 1995: Pp. 73-74)

Simultaneously, some adult members of white supremacist organizations questioned the reliability of these young "punks" who just "wanted to get drunk and cause trouble" (see also Anti-Defamation League 1988). Despite some degree of conflicting sentiments, significant efforts on both sides were invested to create these alliances. While skinheads and adult racists created links that eventually became pervasive, they were never complete.
I will explore these “loose ends” in the next chapter, but for now we will concentrate on how these ties were built and their effects on the skinhead subculture.

Some observers (c.f. Hamm 1993) tend to overstate the importance of Tom Metzger’s White Aryan Resistance in recruiting skinheads into the white supremacist movement. For example, Hamm neglects the earlier indigenous skinhead gangs that existed before WAR’s contact with skinheads. Metzger was doubtlessly important to the skinheads’ development. When the Order Skins fragmented and reformed as the WAR Skins, Tom Metzger had already been communicating with skinheads for a year. Friends working with the National Front in the U.K. convinced Metzger that skinheads were ripe for organizing. As one WAR correspondent put it, “The race movement was blessed with a miracle [the punk movement] in the late ‘70s but we let it slip between our fingers…and if we blow this miracle [the skinheads] we don’t deserve to survive” (quoted in Moore 1993: 90). The associations with the National Front led Metzger to contact British skinheads via mail. Aided by T.V. appearances, leafleting, a computer bulletin, “word of mouth,” and his tape-recorded phone hotline; by the mid-1980s, Los Angeles skinheads had become aware of Metzger. As Metzger’s reputation for “representing white people” grew, he began receiving letters and phone calls from frustrated white kids,

who came from middle and working-class backgrounds and were getting the hell beaten out of ‘em at school, where they had become the minority. I told them organize, if you’re in a school and being screwed by the gangs then you’re going to have to organize your own and if you have to walk home with a half a dozen guys, you gotta do it. Your parents won’t help you, school won’t help you, then it’s survival of the fittest. (Interview Tom Metzger, 2/20/99)

For example, the following is one of the letters Metzger received from one of these frustrated white youth:
...I always have problems with negroes “niggers” I walk down the street with braces and boots and ‘crips’ jump me but I won’t stop fighting for what I believe in. My parents do not believe what we believe in and that causes problems but my grandpa is from the south and he was in the K.K.K. I want to know if you guys can get me in the skinheads. I’m only 12 but I’m down for the skins. I would like to hear from you soon if you can write to me. White Power, Derrick - p.s. could I have some information from WAR. (Skinhead letter 1987)

Many Los Angeles skinheads expressed similar grievances when explaining the attraction of Metzger’s WAR:

In the 80’s they [white kids] gravitated towards us because they [white kids] wanted to fight back and put a stop to it but there weren’t enough people fighting back. In the 80’s they [skinheads] were going to fight, skinheads are openly racial, they’re [society] pushing the kids to it, they sit there and they want to squash it, they’re pushing, they’re pushing us... (Skinhead Interview a., 3/31/02)

Metzger wanted white youth who felt disenfranchised from a rapidly changing world to see WAR as an ally and a resource. To do this he realized that “politics as usual” would not attract the kids. Coplon’s (1989: 82) description captures WAR’s new efforts:

Where the Old Right was aging, isolated, rural-based and mindlessly patriotic, Metzger’s New Right (W.A.R.) would be dynamic, hip, urban, and the champion of a white working class against a treasonous white ruling elite. It would be a place where alienated skinheads could feel at home.

One indicator of Metzger’s success is that by 1988, the WAR Skins numbered as many as 200 youths in the Los Angeles area. The WAR Skins were primarily active from 1986-1989 and they used several different recruiting techniques. For example:
...we'd go to jock parties and just regular high school parties you know. We had a good response that way. We would put a little application out, just like I did, I filled out an application and filled out the information and sent it off and they got in contact with me and we go to these parties and hand out literature and a month later we were going to go meet with one of these kids that was at that party that got the information so that really helped morale and helped us we would say we're actually going out and doing this stuff. Certain people would go out and pass out literature on school campus and it was not legal but we would get response back from that as well.

(Skinhead Interview a., 3/20/01)

or

We'd stick business cards and white power literature in everyone's locker. And we'd know that within a day or two the Black kids or Hispanic kids or Asian kids are going to be so pissed off that they are going to attack a white kid, they're going to beat him up. So a day or two later we'd go back and we'd say 'I heard about all this racial violence you guys have been having here. All these minority groups beating the hell out all you white kids. Did you guys know there's a group out there for you. Did you know there are skinhead groups around that can help you. They can stop this against you guys. We can help you.' (Leydon quoted in Time 8/19/96)

At other times, recruitment was less purposive, and seemed to follow a seamless process:

I first became aware of the skinhead movement, my elder brother whom is three years my senior, he was a W.A.R. Skinhead...I spent a lot of time with my elder brother Donnie and his friends so I was pretty much adopted by them. They took me everywhere with them and they were my friends and mentors. I began by emulating them and ended up becoming fully immersed in the movement by the end of the summer. I was brought in by W.A.R.
Skins so I became a W.A.R. Skin myself...I went everywhere with my brother, parties, rallies, and gatherings, from distributing literature to reciting propaganda to others...(Skinhead Interview n., 9/13/02)

In the first instance, social spaces where white youths gathered were purposively targeted for recruiting purposes. WAR Skins used literature and informal interaction to generate an interest in racial politics among these potential candidates. In doing so, WAR Skins were avoiding complete insularity and detachment from non-skinhead youth culture. In the second instance, recruitment occurred through family socialization. This should not be surprising since the family is typically the primary site of socialization.

WAR Skins originated from various geographic areas including Los Angeles, Orange, San Bernardino, and Riverside Counties as well as regions beyond the Los Angeles area (San Diego, San Francisco and states outside of California.). At its peek, WAR Skins were closely connected with other smaller skinhead gangs, which WAR attempted to consolidate. For example, the Reich Skins who were located in Los Angeles County near the San Fernando Valley, and counted about fifteen members eventually merged with WAR. In other cases, skinhead gangs remained separate from WAR, but worked closely with them. For instance, the American Firm (San Bernardino and Riverside Counties) who counted about 50 or 60 members helped the WAR Skins pass out flyers and set up phone hotlines. Skinhead gangs such as the Huntington Beach Skins (Orange County) and Public Enemy Number One (PENI – Orange County) also had significant contact with the WAR Skins. In the latter case, however, this contact was primarily social and rarely included assistance with political activities.

As noted in chapter four, these overlapping associations exemplify the skinhead penchant for organizational arrangements that are relatively fluid and able to adopt rapid change. Multiple affiliations are also explained by the frequent consolidations of skinhead gangs. These mergers provided skinhead gangs with the opportunity to pool their resources,
an especially important task, given their relatively smaller numbers compared to larger minority gangs.

The WAR Skins' most significant development was their turn toward political activism. The WAR Skins became adept at leafleting various areas of Los Angeles, Orange, and San Bernardino Counties with white power literature, including the Disneyland parking lot (ADL 1990).

Oh yeah, back then every weekend, everyone would show up at my house and we'd start folding flyers, rubber banding, all that stuff, no drinking, we put the cases of beer in the frig and got to work, no bullshit. We picked different areas and kept track which were new and which we'd done before and by the time we put out all the literature, it was eleven or twelve and we went back to my house and partied the rest of the night. (Skinhead Interview a., 6/11/01)

Typically, Metzger helped facilitate these political activities through the sharing of resources (e.g. giving them WAR flyers) and the cultivation of leadership and organizational skills (e.g. inclusion in WAR strategy meetings and assistance with rallies). Sometimes these activities were aimed at voicing specific grievances. For instance, Tom Metzger and about a dozen WAR Skins rallied outside the California State Legislative Building in 1988 to protest discussions of hate crime legislation (Hamm 1993). At other times, these activities were aimed at voicing specific, but rather expressed a broad range of sentiments. These activities were often held in public parks, and included food and a "family-friendly" atmosphere. Leaders gave speeches, literature was distributed, and informal networks were sustained.

By the late 1980s, WAR Skins had reached the height of their public notoriety, appearing on television talk shows across the nation. As with the leafleting on the parking lot of Disneyland, skinheads used talk shows to create spectacles that assured them a large forum for their views.
Appearing on the television program, ‘the Oprah Winfrey Show,’ Tom Metzger, founder of White Aryan Resistance (WAR), accompanied several Orange County WAR Skins. More skinheads from the surrounding Chicago area joined the show in the audience. After Oprah asked one of the WAR Skins to explain the skinhead philosophy, he replied: ‘What makes a skinhead? Attitude. White power. Cause Niggers suck. Niggers and Jews. They’re half monkeys. They should all be killed.’ This was followed by chants from the audience, ‘Yea!’ ‘Fuckin’ right on!’ and ‘Go for it!’ When Oprah cut to a commercial, one of the other WAR skins on stage called her a “monkey” and a skinhead from the audience called her a ‘nigger whore.’ As cameras returned, the skinheads marched off the set, arms clenched in a Nazi salute. After the show, Oprah told a Chicago reporter: ‘I have never seen such hatred in all my life’. (Klanwatch 1989; ADL 1988)

Yet, this exposure was both a curse and blessing. On the one hand, talk shows were effective as recruiting vehicles (Hamm 1993; Moore 1993). As Metzger recently claimed, “after Oprah and Geraldo our recruiting went up one hundred percent at least...” (Interview Tom Metzger, 3/30/99). Others agree that Metzger set the standard for inventive recruiting when his son, Jon, insulted Roy Innis of the Congress of Racial Equality during a Geraldo Rivera show, and started a slugfest. Rivera arose from the melee bloodied and nose broken, but still standing. “After that, when somebody said he joined in 1988, we knew he was a Geraldo skin” (Leydon quoted in Time 8/19/96).

On the other hand, this high level of publicity drew the attention of social control agents who sought to repress skinhead activities. The WAR Skin who called Oprah a “monkey” explained that:

When we came back [from Oprah] skinheads were the nation’s favorite villain...the Oprah Show made it hard for us, the police really started gunning for us, before that there was some police who didn’t mind us too
much, but after that everyone wanted to take the skinheads down, the Jews were really putting a lot of pressure on the local authorities to take care of us. (Skinhead Interview o., 12/9/02)

The WAR Skins’ growth did not last long, as their numbers quickly dwindled. When new recruits realized the challenges or “high risks” (McAdam 1986) which accompanied the life of a skinhead activist, many drifted to less demanding subcultures. A long-time skinhead in Orange County says that, eventually, groups like the WAR Skins became more concerned with the quality of membership and less concerned with quantity.

We learned that it was more important to have quality over quantity. It didn’t help us if we had a bunch of scumbags, we wanted people who were dedicated to their race, not just partying and getting laid...It’s not about the numbers, I mean, today, I’ve got a small circle of friends that I can count on and we learned that back with WAR that was more important. (Skinhead Interview a., 1/29/99)

One of the founders of the WAR Skins explained the high rate of skinhead attrition as resulting from pre-determined individual inclinations, “most people who shit out [leave] never had it in their hearts, they were never really true racists; it was only a matter time” (Skinhead o., 12/9/02). Facing this trend, core members began to closely scrutinize new recruits. With the WAR skins developing “higher standards,” their numbers continued to slowly diminish.

The formation of the WAR skins marked two changes in the skinhead subculture. While the early skinhead gangs expressed territoriality in much the same way as the larger culture of street gangs (Schneider 1999; Moore 1991; Vigil 1988), during the 1980s skinhead politicization diminished the importance of physical territory by introducing relatively abstract notions of space (e.g. state power as opposed the neighborhood).

Skinhead de-territorialization was also related to their relatively small numbers and lack of ties to their communities. Instead of claiming street corners, WAR Skins began participat-
ing in political activism, which was previously unseen among southern California skinheads*. Second, WAR skins embraced a framework that was supra local, as exemplified by the ZOG discourse. By providing a common language with an easy “villain” to identify, the ZOG discourse became a powerful tool that could easily unite racists in disparate locations with vastly different experiences.

The skinhead movement took an even harder turn then [late 1980s] and that’s when it really became anti-Semitic. That’s when it started believing the conspiracies of the World Bank and the conspiracies of Judaism, that they’re behind everything. They own all the banks, they own all the media…(Leydon quoted in Time 8/19/96)

Skinheads did not embrace the ZOG discourse by osmosis. Organizations such as WAR provided important tutelage in this learning process. Metzger’s monthly magazine as well as his other literature provided “informative” reading material that consistently portrayed anti-Semitic images and discussed the role of the Jewish people in world affairs. Skinheads consider these materials as critical in their “intellectual development”:

Well, in terms of ZOG, I mainly learned about this from Tom and all of his information. I’d heard a little about the Jews before that but not much, I wasn’t educated about their history and how they’ve managed to fuck-up every society they move to. But reading WAR’s stuff and some of the other organizations like AN [the Aryan Nation] and others, that’s where I got a lot of information and also learned about books that I should read that give an even more in-depth explanations….(Skinhead Interview a., 7/14/02)

External influences such as international and domestic links with white supremacist organizations were critical to the politicization of the skinhead subculture, yet, we should be careful about explaining this process as solely the result of external influence. There were also important internal subcultural changes that helped spawn an indigenous skinhead social movement organization; the Hammerskin Nation (HSN).
Internal Dynamics: Skinheads Develop

Throughout the 1980's, skinheads moved toward greater organization, developing linkages to older white supremacist groups like the White Aryan Resistance, the Aryan Nations, the World Church of the Creator and various branches of the Ku Klux Klan. According to many observers, this alliance has been one of the most significant developments to occur in recent years (Dobratz and Shanks-Meile 1997). These trends marked the diminishing salience of local territorialized identities and the attempt to infuse a truly international identity into the racist skinhead subculture. However, the internal dynamics that helped nourish the success of these ties have been overlooked.

While organizations like the Northside Firm and the Order Skins were not politically active, they were extremely important in producing a stable group of racist activists who helped direct skinheads toward politicization. In fact, many of these skinheads went on to develop the first branch of the Western Hammerskins almost ten years later. The WAR Skins were another important transition in the organizational development of skinhead gangs. WAR Skins' influence reached beyond their immediate members as they were one of the first southern California skinhead gangs to embrace political activism as part of their strategy. Political activism and consolidation also helped generate a feeling among WAR Skins that they were the “vanguard” of the skinhead subculture.

By 1990, the organizational structure of the largest skinhead gangs in southern California had pretty well dissolved (Simi and Brents 2002). Rather than resulting in complete fragmentation, however, a significant portion of the skinhead subculture coalesced around the effort to organize a Hammerskin chapter in southern California (i.e. the Western Hammerskins). According to one of the founders of this organization, the creation of the Western Hammers brought previously divided factions of skins together, and helped encourage a global outlook by increasing direct international ties with skinheads from multiple nations:
Oh yeah after we organized the Hammers our contact with skinheads from all over southern California and even other countries definitely increased, we had contact before, but being part of the Hammers helped us in the direction of seeing other skinheads as international brothers fighting for the same cause...we didn't really have email back then, but we would telephone and fax and they would come over to visit especially during events like 'Aryan Fest'. (Skinhead Interview d., 3/13/02)

Birth of the Hammerskin Nation

Inspired by Pink Floyd's The Wall, a pair of criss-crossed hammers emerged to represent a new trend in the skinhead subculture. The first Hammerskin group, the Confederate Hammerskins, formed in Dallas, Texas, sometime between 1987 and 1988 (Anti-Defamation League 2000). HN made strides toward increasing their “nation’s” members by opening more branches (Eastern Hammerskins, the Northern Hammerskins, and the Western Hammerskins) by helping coordinate racist events such as the Aryan Fest, and by sponsoring “white power” music bands. These branches have now been united under the umbrella of the Hammerskin Nation for more than a decade.

What is distinctive about the Hammerskins is their explicit attempt to bridge international barriers and their greater degree of organization. According to imprisoned Hammerskin Jimmy Matchette, and HSN founder, international unity is an important Hammerskin goal: “Our mission has drawn all of us from the four corners of the earth. The winds of destiny have drawn us and have carried us across geographical boundaries and from various ethnic branches of the White Aryan race to graft us into one Nation.” (Anti-Defamation League 2000).

While early skinhead gangs tended to be rather loosely organized with frequent changes in leadership, Hammerskins sought to develop a stable organization with clearly delineated goals and responsibilities. Tom Metzger, who maintained close contact with Hammerskins...
I stated, "they [Hammerskins] have more or less elected leaders, post-office boxes, websites, and newsletters" (Interview Tom Metzger, 2/20/99). Additionally, HN branches typically screen applicants and place new members on a probation period during which their participation is highly monitored. And as opposed to the more gang-like ritual of "jump-ins" to initiate new members, Hammerskins have utilized a form of "hazing" that resembles the military or fraternal organizations (e.g. pro-longed periods of physical exercise etc.).

By 1990, the Western Hammers were the newest addition to the HSN family. With southern California's relatively large number of skinheads, it seemed that the Western Hammers might become the largest and more successful HN branch. During the first half of the 1990s, there was evidence that the Western Hammers were following the Southern California skinheads' political emphasis. For example, in 1994, the Western Hammers organized the "Aryan Fest" which took place in San Bernardino County, and, was at the time, one of the largest white power music shows in the United States.

Similar to the WAR Skin's sudden demise, by the mid 1990s the Western Hammers began experiencing a downward spiral. The main cause seemed to be internal strife. Strife was evident especially among the leadership, and by 1996, several key leaders had left (one went on to law school, and wanted to move into mainstream politics, and another made a very public defection from the racist movement that included "anti-hate" commercials aired on the Music Television Channel (MTV)). Another received a near fatal injury during an altercation with several Hispanic youth at a small grocery store, and others drifted away. One former WAR Skin who briefly experimented with the Hammers described their formation and eventual decline in the following manner:

Well the Western Hammers that were here, don't remember when that was, early 90's I guess...Got involved with them and I don't know, maybe 6 months, did a quick stint with them but it never completely flourished the way other Hammer chapters did, we did a couple of barbeques...It was alright, there was a lot of good people involved and there's a lot of scum
bags too, I find out now, snitches and whatever so you get involved in the organization, you're taken chances...you never really know...(Skinhead Interview c., 6/12/01)

Another former WAR Skin who never joined the Hammers but maintained close contact with them, described their problems as arising from a "superior attitude and looking down on other skinheads" who were not Hammers.

Although the Western Hammers continue to maintain a presence within the Southern California skinhead subculture, they remain the weakest of the American HSN branches. Their decline reflects the transient nature of the skinhead subculture and the difficulty maintaining commitment over long periods of time. With such a large influx, organizational stability and continuity is extremely difficult to maintain. Instead of continuity, change is the skinhead organizational trademark.

The Waning of Public Political Activism

Even before the Western Hammers' decline, efforts at directing the skinhead subculture toward hidden forms of resistance were well under way. In 1989, after White Aryan Resistance came under scrutiny for a racially-motivated murder in Portland, Oregon, Tom Metzger requested that the WAR Skins no longer use this organizational identification. Although the WAR Skins changed their name to Aryan White Separatists (AWS), members eventually abandoned an official organizational title, opting for other less visible forms of affiliation.

We disbanded W.A.R. Skins back in early '89 at the request of someone we respect a great deal. Those who didn't turn traitor scum formed other organizations. A lot of us ex-W.A.R. Skins still hang out to this day. The scene in So.Cal. goes through constant changes. (Skinhead Interview o.,11/7/02)
Hammers were also realizing that public activism was an extremely costly tactic that may not be worth the risks. According to Dobratz and Shanks-Meile (1997:66), “they [Hammerskins] question the need to march and place their faces in the limelight and would rather be low-keyed, trying to find like-minded people to associate with”.

This move toward less visible forms of activism portended a larger trend in the white supremacy movement. Eventually, calls for “leaderless resistance” (Beam 1992) became a commonly advocated strategy for coping with an extremely hostile external environment (Simi and Futrell 2002). Metzger was no longer content with skinheads serving as “street soldiers,” but was now also encouraging them to grow their hair out... I wanted them to get jobs and go to school, build careers and many of them listened and now they've gotten in the military, banks, schools, corporations, government. I told them that hanging out on the streets beating people up, making yourself an easy target for the police, getting hauled into jail, that's no way to fight a war like this. So now they're working their way into the system, getting themselves into strategic positions and preparing for the inevitable — a white revolution, a race war. (Tom Metzger Interview, 5/17/00)

Metzger claims these covert strategies have been quite successful, and points to a process of maturation that he supposedly helped channel:

We have advised all the skinheads that will listen to make sure they get a good education, get into real sensitive spots, whether its business, government or whatever keep your mouth shut but still maintain your ideas and thoughts. That scares them more than anything because they wonder where the skinheads go. We got a cartoon that shows a guy in court, he takes off his hairpiece, he's got a suit, briefcase. A lot of the kids that joined me back in the 1980s are now married and have families and you wouldn't know they had ever been skinheads. (Tom Metzger 5/17/00)
One of the most important questions that a de-emphasis of public political activity raises is whether this unobtrusiveness simultaneously weakens political sentiments or whether this change is a "holding period" (Taylor 1989) that nurtures racist sentiments and will ultimately help generate another wave of public mobilization? I argue that, although this de-emphasis leads some in directions that ultimately neutralizes their ideological sentiments and political commitments, as a whole, de-emphasis is a strategic adaptation that provides important shelter during hostile times.

With political gangs disbanding, moving underground, and infiltrating various social institutions, other skinhead gangs that never embraced public politics suddenly were more visible. This visibility increased as gangs that had previously been involved in non-specialized delinquent activity (e.g. vandalism, fighting, and minor theft) transitioned toward specialized, profit-oriented criminal activity (methamphetamine trade, counterfeiting, and identity theft). This transition was facilitated by the experience of incarceration. As law enforcement agencies were increasing their efforts to repress skinheads by the late 1980s, it was increasingly common for skinheads to be treated as gangs, and police departments were tracking skinhead affiliations and activities. The opportunity to arrest skinheads was considered an important part of the strategy to disband these gangs. Once incarcerated, skinheads began developing ties with the Aryan Brotherhood, the largest white prison gang in the United States (Earley 1992). By 1980s the AB had been certified by the California Department of Corrections as a prison gang and confirmed members were subject to secure housing units (SHU). SHU'd inmates are denied access to the "yard" and segregated from the general population. The AB needed white inmates to serve as "middlemen" for their criminal operations, and skinhead gangs were a good resource. Instead of serving as "foot soldiers" for the "white revolution," these skinhead gangs were helping further the goals of organized criminal activity.

The shift from social to political gangs corresponded with a shift from episodic to consistent racism. Skinhead beliefs were changing. But while the transition toward explicit
racism was important, it was only one piece of the larger process of politicization. This transition from an unstructured to a relatively structured ideological system featured the adoption of the “ZOG” discourse, which signaled a “Nazification” of the skinhead subculture (Southern Poverty Law Center 1995), and the incorporating of new practices most evident in skinheads’ new-found involvement in political activism (marches, rallies, leafleting). However, the radicalization of skinhead racism and politicization are relatively autonomous processes. While the mobilization of racism may be a component of the larger process of politicization, the increasing virulence of their racism did not always translate into political activity. We cannot assume that because a skinhead gang is racist, it is therefore also political. Politicization was neither a foregone conclusion nor was it ever a complete shift for all skinheads.

However, to the extent that social gangs did not vanish after politics became the dominant subcultural emphasis; the recent shift toward economic gangs does not imply a “de-politicization” of the skinheads. We need to recognize that politics and profit-oriented crime co-exist as important currents. Sometimes these currents conflict and compete with each other, at other times; they converge and complement each other, and much of the time, they simply co-exist. It is these points of agreement and disagreement that help shed light on what directions the skinhead subculture may take in the future.
Notes

1 Although Short and Strodtbeck's did not directly observe racial conflict during their 2 years of fieldwork, they do reference earlier reports that provide evidence of this issue.

2 The Northwest Imperative is a proposal to create a white homeland using the states of Washington, Oregon, Idaho, and Montana (see Dobratz and Shanks-Meile 1997).

3 British sport culture is rooted in the neighborhood where tradition ensures a fan-base that often extends across several generations within the same family. The relative density of Britain makes following your club logistically much less expensive compared to the U.S. (Moore 1993).

4 This is not to say that WAR Skins never claimed specific areas or used graffiti markers to identify their presence, but their primary organizational emphasis was directed toward political activism.
CHAPTER 6

CRIMINALIZATION

This chapter tells the story of the transition from the political to the economic phases in skinhead gangs. Between 1979 and 1984, skinhead gangs were primarily organized around style and music and drinking and fighting. Whiteness was important, but not central; however, skinhead gangs underwent another transition that changed this. Between 1984 and 1994, racialized politics became skinheads' central subcultural emphasis and skinheads were constructing a program which strongly encouraged global ideational elements and participation in political activism. Social networks that linked skinheads to international and domestic white supremacist organizations facilitated these changes. Yet, by the early 1990s, the trend toward highly visible public activism was giving way to an emphasis upon hidden forms of resistance. This transition involved a move from unspecialized, garden-variety delinquency prominent during the initial formation of skinhead gangs and the racially-motivated violence prominent during the political phase to specialized criminal activity and links to profit-oriented crime. This third phase in skinhead subcultural development, is the hardest to locate in a specific time-period, because an economic emphasis has always been present but in more muted forms than present today.

In this third phase, skinhead gangs are also racist but their primary interests surround profit-oriented criminal activity. They neither participate in political activism nor are they as well connected to the white supremacist movement like earlier political gangs. The relationship between racism and criminal activity varies depending upon the specific organization and factors such as the surrounding community. The change to an economic
emphasis was facilitated by three factors: (1) the waning of political gangs, (2) members’ experiences while incarcerated, and (3) the growth of the methamphetamine trade among skinheads.

The shift toward economic criminal activity dovetailed with the retreat from public political activism, as both efforts necessitated secrecy in order to avoid detection by forces of social control. While there is a general tendency for skinhead subcultural change to occur rapidly, this transition toward economic gangs was gradual. When many of the skinhead gangs were turning towards politics, other gangs maintained a less politicized “street” mentality.

Yeah, in a nutshell what I will say is that we are a gang, we make no pretense about it, we’re a gang, plain and simple…when people say gang they think blacks and Mexicans and shit like that but whatever….

(Skinhead Interview k., 8/12/02)

One of the most important differences between the gangs that became politicized and those that did not was the latter’s lack of ties to adult white supremacist organizations. Gangs that did not become political never developed strong ties to political organizations external to the skinhead subculture like WAR, remaining insular and largely autonomous. Although these skinhead gangs associated with politicized skinheads, they rarely participated in activist-oriented practices such as leafleting, marches, etc. They embraced racism and elements of Nazism, but also retained a framework that simultaneously encouraged pursuing non-political interests (petty theft, drug use). Further, they did not incorporate the ZOG discourse in the way that politicized skinhead gangs did. Therefore, their racism remained less structured and did not include a global conspiratorial framework.

The specific origins of the various economic gangs were separate, but they maintained close contact with each other. These gangs included the Nazi Lowriders (NLR), Public Enemy Number One (PENI), the Norwalk Skins, La Mirada Punk (LMP), Crosstar, the Insane White Boys (IWB), Vicious Circle (VC) and Notorious Youth (NY).
The Antecedents of Economic Gangs:
the Early Days, 1979-1986

Before shifting toward an economic emphasis, these gangs were best characterized as social stylistic gangs. As discussed in chapter four, social gangs were primarily based upon fraternal relations, stylistic interests, and cafeteria-type delinquency (e.g. non-specialized violations that included graffiti, fighting, under-age drinking, theft etc.). Although many of these skinhead social gangs developed ties with the white supremacist movement, adopted political stances, and participated in racial activism, some did not follow this subcultural current. Instead, they remained insular, keeping a low profile and interested in immediate local matters (e.g. conflict with punks gangs like the Suicidals, LADS, and other street gangs).

The difference between an economic gang like the NLR and a political gang like the WAR Skins is best described by a continuum with political ideology at one end and criminal enterprise at the other. The WAR Skins clearly fall toward the political end of the continuum, while the Nazi Lowriders fall at the other end. Within this continuum, gangs like PENT fall toward the criminal end, but are more committed to racist ideology than the NLR. These ideational differences reflect the diverse organizational histories that exist among separate skinhead gangs. For example, unlike most skinhead gangs discussed thus far, the NLR originated as a prison gang in the early 1980s among white youths incarcerated in the California Youth Authority (CYA) (ADL 2001). The gang’s name reflects the skinhead ability to integrate seemingly incongruent cultural streams (National Socialism and Hispanic car culture). California prison officials claim that the NLR started as a “defensive” gang to provide young white inmates with protection from minority inmates who are often the numerical majority in California correctional facilities (Law Enforcement Interview f., 3/20/00).

Initially, NLR members embraced a generic white gang identity, sometimes referred to as “Peckerwood”. Although the exact etiology of this term is unknown, it is commonly
used within the penal system to refer to white inmates (ADL 2001: 2). The NLR’s Peckerwood origin partly explains the trajectory of their ideology, which as stated above tends to be less interested in traditional political activism. Although political activism has never been part of the NLR’s repertoire, racist ideology is still important. As one former member indicates, racial exclusion provides the gang with some sense of “elitism”. This member notes the NLR’s membership policy, which strictly prohibits the inclusion of African-Americans: “You must have at least half white blood but no black blood” (quoted in ADL 2001: 3). However, the NLR tends to subscribe to a relatively broad notion of whiteness, considering some Hispanics as acceptable for membership. Seen from outside skinhead organizational norms or from only one group’s perspective, the existence of the NLR seems unbelievable and contradictory. Yet, this ignores the history of skinhead subcultural development that has always been far from homogenous, often integrating wide-ranging and contrasting cultural elements. The NLR also highlights the ambiguous racial status of Hispanics among skinhead gangs that I discussed in chapter four. Although many skinhead gangs express deep animosity toward Hispanics, there is a tenuous subcultural precedence for cooperation with Hispanics and even inclusion within some skinhead gangs.

At the same time that WAR Skins organized themselves, another group of skinheads adopted the name Public Enemy Number One. PENI’s origins were comparable to many of the punk gangs already mentioned. A local Hardcore band, Rudimentary Peni had established a reputation for extremely “edgy” music that caught the eyes of a few southern California youths. The first were a group of punk kids from Long Beach who named themselves Public Enemy Number One Death Squad (PDS). Like other punk gangs, PDS was formed around members’ favorite band, providing the band with security during shows. Another clique of youths in the Anaheim and Huntington Beach areas became familiar with PDS and was impressed with the gang. In the mid 1980s, “Scottish,” an unaffiliated skinhead living in Huntington Beach began “tagging” the word PENI on
various spots across Orange County because he thought, “it sounded cool”. Scottish hung out with several skinhead gangs at the time including the Order Skins. In 1986, Scottish and several other local skinheads in the Anaheim area, most notably, “Popeye,” decided to make PENI their official moniker and formed a skinhead gang. PENI's goal was relatively simple: to develop a street reputation and provide white kids with defense from other gangs. According to another early member, PENI was all about “white boys banding together to protect themselves” (Skinhead Interview j., 5/22/02).

Starting with a relatively small number, PENI developed ties with the skinhead subculture in Orange County. Although PENI was less interested in politics than the WAR Skins, the two gangs maintained significant ties with each other. Some of the more politically-oriented skinheads of the mid-1980s claim that initially PENI had a fairly peripheral status and were thought of as a “bunch of young punks,” however, other skinheads report that although PENI was clearly uninterested in the political aspects of racism, they were respected and welcomed by more political skinheads.

During the same time that PENI was forming, the NLR’s membership also remained relatively small and little was heard about them beyond the California prison walls. On the streets, the NLR hung out, but they were not remarkable. As one Huntington Beach Skin remembers,

well, the NLR, they were around back then [1980s], but they weren’t any big thing, they weren't special or anything. They just were another skinhead gang, some of 'em were pretty good people, but they had a lot of fuck-ups you know.... Skinhead Interview m., 6/22/02

Other gangs like the Norwalk Skins and La Mirada Punk also originated during the mid-1980s as a means of defense. Both of these gangs hailed from racially/ethnically diverse areas, where Hispanic gangs were the most prevalent. Skinheads from these areas explain their emergence as directly relating to self-protection from “non-white” gangs:
Well the city of Norwalk itself is a very dark city, there are some white neighborhoods but it's a relatively rough area so you got yourself a group of skinheads who are all from the same area and it's a pretty tough place to live especially to be on your own when there are so many other gangs there who are going to whoop on you if you don't have any sort of, if you don't have anything to fall back on, so in response to necessity or get beaten on a regular basis forming a gang possibly works. (Skinhead Interview k., 9/20/02)

How did social gangs primarily concerned with a defensive orientation and protection from subcultural opponents, transition to an economic emphasis and involvement in sophisticated organized criminal activity?

The Waning of Public Political Activism

By the dawn of the 1990s, the Southern Poverty Law Center had successfully sued and won a multi-million dollar civil judgment against Tom Metzger and Jon Metzger's White Aryan Resistance for the organization's alleged incitement of a racially-motivated murder in Portland, Oregon (Dobratz and Shanks-Meile 1997). After coming under scrutiny for the murder, Tom Metzger requested that the WAR Skins no longer use this organizational affiliation. The WAR Skins agreed and opted for other less visible forms of activism. The civil suit against WAR was strong proof that highly visible political activism and easily identifiable organizational affiliations were no longer effective tools. While these activities helped skinheads gain notoriety, they also led to significant repression. In the epicenters of skinhead activity (e.g. Huntington Beach) police departments and other community organizations (e.g. the Orange County Human Rights Commission) began paying more attention to these gangs. In response to these efforts, many skinheads were questioning the effectiveness of maintaining a highly public status. The result did not necessarily mean a
de-politicization, but rather a de-emphasis on visible political activity. This de-emphasis helped create a subcultural space for another current to emerge.

By the late 1990s, some law enforcement officials responsible for tracking skinhead gangs were convinced that political skinheads were “a thing of the past...the traditional political skinheads are no more...” (Law Enforcement Interview f. 3/20/00). Looking backwards, the strategic shift from public protest to less visible activism helped create the perception that political skinhead gangs no longer existed, and when the activities of criminally-oriented skinhead gangs grew, they appeared to be the only ones left. Further, with political skinheads desiring a quieter existence, the interests of economic and political gangs coalesced. Both emphasized covert strategies to avoid agents of social control, which served to reduce the social and ideational distance between economic and political gangs. While this shared interest in covert strategies has not erased all the cleavages that exist between political and economic gangs, the “vanguard” attitude and activism that characterized political gangs during the height of their notoriety lessened. Political skinheads seem more willing to let other skinheads “do their own thing” even if it seems to conflict with their version of the skinhead ethos, which may be related to the skinheads being severely “outnumbered” by minority gangs and their realization that certain accommodations and alliances are going to be necessary. Secondly, the willingness to “look the other way” may be an attempt by political skinheads to create a greater degree of subcultural homogeneity, where differences that might otherwise cause conflict are simply overlooked and not mentioned.

The Experience of Incarceration

With greater police attention directed at skinheads, it was inevitable that more skinheads would be incarcerated. This was the second factor that facilitated the change in organizational emphasis. By the late 1980s law enforcement agencies were stepping up their efforts to repress skinhead activities and disband these gangs. Law enforcement
authorities were largely successful as a significant number of skinheads were incarcerated for a wide-variety of offenses. Surveillance and arrests forced skinheads to curtail their activities. For example, In Los Angeles County from 1988-to-1989, arrests of skinheads for violent-related incidents increased by 50 percent, while this same figure increased by 33 percent in Orange County between 1989 and 1990. Several law enforcement officers described the growing awareness among police departments about skinhead gangs:

It took us a while to get a hold on things, but by 87, 88 and on we really cracked down on 'em. We weren't gonna let them get by with anything and when they staged an event, we were there and we busted people for anything we legally could. Didn't matter if it was violent or not, we picked people up on PVs [Parole/Probation Violations], suspended licenses didn't matter. If there were a bunch walking around downtown, we stopped 'em...found out who they were running with that kind of stuff.... (Law Enforcement Interview d., 1/29/99)

The experience of incarceration helped forge new organizational ties with the Aryan Brotherhood (AB), the most powerful and notorious white prison gang in the United States. The AB's origins date back to California's San Quentin State Prison in the 1960s (Earley 1992). The AB is a racist prison gang, but their first objective is maintaining a high status in the prison system. Because white inmates in the California correctional system are severely outnumbered, the AB found it necessary to cultivate an alliance with the Mexican Mafia prison gang. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the AB began recruiting young white inmates from the California Youth Authority to assist with their criminal operations. These recruiting efforts increased during the 1990s as greater numbers of skinheads were incarcerated. Since then, the Nazi Lowriders and Public Enemy Number One have developed a close working relationship with the AB. The relationship with the AB has been comparable to other skinhead gangs' relationship with the White Aryan Resistance (WAR). Like the channeling process toward political activism that resulted from network ties to the white
supremacist movement, the same has been true for this shift toward profit-oriented crime. While WAR preached political sophistication, the AB preached economic sophistication. Although the AB exists beyond prison walls, its primary organizational base is on “the inside”. In a recent indictment, the Los Angeles County District Attorney explains the AB’s search for assistants: “To maintain control over the Caucasian prison population, the Brotherhood needed to give authority and power to another group that had the accessibility and mobility to continue committing crimes in prison” (quoted in the Los Angeles Times 2001: 1). The NLR and PENI were exactly what the AB needed.

While PENI’s relationship with the AB is more recent, the NLR has a long history with the AB. By the early 1990s, the California Department of Corrections (CDC) had managed to upset and stifle the AB’s criminal activities through segregated housing units used for high-risk inmates. The AB desperately needed a gang with access to the “yard” (prison area where general population inmates congregate) in order to carry on their business operations and mete out needed punishments. While the segregated housing units created a significant barrier for the AB, it propelled the NLR into a strategic position. The NLR was quickly rising to the top of the white prison gang hierarchy in California, but the NLR was just beginning to experience an accelerated growth in membership. In 1996, there were 28 confirmed NLR members, but by 2000, there were as many as 1500 members in the California prison system and 400 members in San Bernardino alone. By the late 1990s, the NLR had spread beyond California (e.g. Nevada, Colorado, and New Mexico and as far east as Illinois, Indiana and Florida) (ADL 2001).

However, like the WAR Skin’s rapid growth, the NLR’s did not last long. By the late 1990s, the NLR’s numbers were skyrocketing and their status was increasing, which encouraged a small number of NLR members to start a faction called the “FTB” (Fuck the Brotherhood [Aryan Brotherhood]). FTB was obviously defiant of the deferential role that the NLR was expected to play and felt that it was necessary to sever ties with the AB and establish a completely autonomous status (Skinhead Interview, f., 6/27/01). The FTB
quickly floundered, unable to match the numbers, tenacity, and tradition of the AB, leaving those who opted for this organizational experiment to either "beg forgiveness" or "debrief" (leave the gang and seek institutional protection). Ultimately, the NLR could not sustain such rapid growth which resulted in organizational deterioration and declining membership.

Simultaneous with the NLR's faltering; PENI's relationship with the AB has grown stronger over the last few years. Peni's improved status with the AB is not only a result of the NLR's problems, but also because PENI has traditionally maintained a tighter operation, with a smaller and more cohesive leadership basis. Further, the NLR's origination inside the California youth prisons, allows the CDC to classify the NLR as a prison gang, which can then be used to segregate its members from the general population. However, PENI's street origins prevent this classification, thereby minimizing the level of security that prison officials can use. This is another reason why the AB is attracted to PENI: as the AB's power relies upon access to the prison yards, its relationship to PENI may be further strengthened if one of PENI's founders who recently received a "life sentence" is "patched" (initiated) into the AB. If this should happen, there are several other core members being groomed to fill his shoes as the "shot caller" (i.e. the primary leader) (Law Enforcement Interview b., 3/20/02).

Over the last several years, large numbers of PENI members have been incarcerated, which has led to a quasi-hybridization of PENI's organizational form. No longer just a street gang, they now maintain a significant presence in the prison system. In both the NLR and PENI's case, incarceration has played a significant role in shaping their organizational form and maybe more importantly, their organizational interests.

The 'Meth' Connection

The skinhead relationship with methamphetamine (meth) is the third factor that influenced the move to an economic emphasis. Traditionally, skinheads have often held anti-drug stances, not withstanding their notoriously large amounts of alcohol consump-
tion. Although some skinhead gangs have been vehement about their anti-drug stance, other gangs have been either ambivalent or unopposed to certain drugs. Next to alcohol, meth seems to be the skinheads' drug of choice. Some skinheads claim that the use of methamphetamine is part of the larger Nazi tradition they belong to and are seeking to maintain (Hamm 2001). These claims serve important rhetorical functions that may reflect attempts by skinheads to mold particular public personas as opposed to accurate descriptions of the significance of the drug. My interviews and observation with skinheads reveal the symbolic connection to German Nazis thru methamphetamine was rarely discussed and appears to have little direct relevance to skinhead participants. What seemed far more important was “getting high” and finding a means to survive (e.g. theft, drug distribution, fraud etc.).

Although skinheads' involvement in the distribution of methamphetamine was extended after developing ties with the AB, skinheads were fond of this drug before they became connected to the AB. The use of methamphetamine has never been as prevalent as alcohol, but some skinheads have used (and sold) this drug since the beginning of the subculture. Although exactly how widespread the use of methamphetamine is among Southern California skinheads is unclear, it is not surprising that given the substances' effects (e.g. heightened aggression, extreme anxiety and paranoia, and fast-paced living style) (Hamm 2001) a homology would exist between skinheads and methamphetamine. There is substantial previous research that demonstrates subcultures typically favor drugs that reflect their core characteristics. The fact that Hippies preferred marijuana is no surprise given their relaxed and laid back posture and their orientation toward the importance of peace (Willis 1990; Pearson 1987; Brake 1985; Burr 1984; Moore 1978). Skinheads have found that participation in the drug trade is also extremely profitable, as meth is no longer simply favored for its high.

The manufacturing and distribution of methamphetamine has been skinheads' most notable involvement in criminal activity. The NLR and PENI are the skinhead gangs most
closely linked to the meth trade, and both organizations have links to motorcycle gangs (the Vagos and the infamous Hells Angels) who are responsible for a significant proportion of the manufacturing of methamphetamine (Spergel 1995). The NLR and Peni have also conducted business (trading methamphetamine for guns) with minority gangs in Southern California. One recent case involved a methamphetamine ring with distribution that stretched all the way to New York. During the investigation, some 16 methamphetamine laboratories in the Antelope and San Fernando Valley were shut down. Additionally, more than 45 pounds of methamphetamine valued at over $2 million, scores of firearms and more than $500,000 in cash were confiscated. Approximately 30 percent of the drug ring was affiliated with either the NLR or other white supremacist prison and street gangs (Los Angeles Times 3/31/01).

Drugs and Crime: Cleavages in the Skinhead Subculture

The increasing emphasis upon economically-oriented criminal activity has not been without its detractors inside the skinhead subculture. Some skinheads feel that "real skinheads" do not commit non-political criminal activity. These skinheads will sometimes refer to criminally-oriented skinheads as "scumbags" or "white trash" or offer statements such as: "blacks can't help it, it's part of their genes, but these guys know better and they do it anyway" (Skinhead Interview 1/15/02). The criticism of criminally-oriented skinheads is further illustrated by another skinhead who also argues drug use as a racial characteristic not suited for "members" of the "white race":

Skinhead is not about using drugs. There is no justification for it. Look at the heroes of our race and movement; Adolph Hitler, Rudolf Hess, Bob Mathews, George Lincoln Rockwell, Ian Stuart. These men dedicated and gave their lives for our movement and race and none of them needed drugs to fight for our cause. Why would any self-respecting White man or woman...
disgrace themselves, our race, our movement, and the memory these great men by soiling themselves with drugs? What's more unfortunate is there are a lot of Skinheads out there that could be productive people in the movement, but put smoking dope ahead of their race and comrades. (Skinhead Interview f., 7/28/99)

Another skinhead sees these trends as reflecting poorly upon the entire subculture:

Over the past year or two it's kind of been inundated with drug use and gang mentality. This unfortunately gives the Southern California Skinhead movement a bad name around the world. There are a lot of good Skinheads in Southern California and you can't let a few bad apples spoil the bunch.

(Skinhead Interview o., 11/17/00)

However, others who maintain a political stance see the possibility of strategically using economic gangs to the advantage of promoting the white supremacy movement. For example,

Nazi Low Riders, I think there is probably a bridge in some cases political and criminal. Mostly because we need money to operate. Like the left wing they use drugs to get money and of course some of the right wing have done that too. The Nazi Lowriders have non white Mexicans and stuff in there, that don't work with us, they can cause confusion and upset the system, that's fine. Making a strong link with a mixed up group....I think the means justify the end if it works, it ok with me. If you feel your race is in that big of danger than there would be nothing you probably wouldn't do to save it. There are guys out there that are both racial and criminal I think probably they will become leaders some day because it's going to be, I mean the shits really going to get bad, it's going to get mean and it's going to take some people that are ruthless, I don't think I'm ruthless. I never had to be
but there is a new breed coming on. Who knows, it's amazing how things start to evolve. (Interview Tom Metzger, 6/17/99)

Sometimes the same individual simultaneously holds contradictory views related to these differing subcultural emphases. For instance, the same skinhead who stated that true skinheads do not engage in drug-taking and other criminal activity, on another occasion, wagered that there might be room for different types of skinhead organizations and that in fact, these differences might be useful:

they got their way of doing things, I don't personally agree with all of it but a lot of those guys are goods guys you know they back each other up and if one 'em goes down they all go down...sure there's scum out there that call themselves skinheads, but I do think it's possible for us to work together, maybe some of these guys will be good on the frontline, we're gonna need as many as we can get....(Skinhead Interview o., 11/15/02)

There is a possibility that economic gangs may provide a “radical flank” (Haines 1988) diverting attention from political skinheads and enabling adult white supremacists to work more quietly. Political skinheads willing to appear as “moderate” may use these economic gangs to position themselves as the “less of two evils” in order to gain concessions.

The cleavages surrounding drugs and crime illustrate that subcultural phases of development are not the result of group consensus; but instead, reflect tenuous changes that result from struggles between different factions. This last shift toward economic gangs has been the most contested, revealing serious cleavages within the skinhead subculture. Yet, in the face of these seemingly insurmountable differences, skinheads and their gangs find ways to bridge these divisions. Some of these efforts are individual “band-aids” to heal sore points within the movement, while others are large-scale strategies designed to “squash” conflict and strengthen alliances.

It would be wrong to view skinheads as only passive receptors determined by these larger organizational divisions. Skinheads understand the importance of forging alliances
with each other. Skinheads have recently formed the “Southern California Skinhead Alliance” which is led by the PENI Skins and the NLR, but also includes the Norwalk Skins, La Mirada Punks (LMP), and other skinheads from across Southern California (ADL 1999). In spite of reservations about the accuracy of a wholesale alliance, there is clear evidence that alliances are forming. However, the effectiveness of these efforts is severely limited due to continuing skinhead factionalism. Some skinheads view this factionalism as an asset. I have heard many skinheads discuss this issue, even sarcastically appropriating the phrase, “diversity is our strength” (borrowed from the anti-racist movement) to illustrate that differences among skinheads do not necessarily weaken the subculture. Instead, many skinheads opine that as long as skinheads remain racist, other emphases are not as important. Further, these differences may also have some strategic use in confusing social control agents, and disrupting their efforts at monitoring skinhead activities.

Racism and Economic Gangs

The most difficult aspect of economic gangs to describe is their racism. There is a tendency to treat these gangs as either fully immersed in the white supremacy movement and ready to lead a Nazi revival or as purely a-political gangs whose racism matters little. It is hard to avoid these poles, but the fact of the matter is that although economic gangs place profit at a premium (especially as compared to social and political gangs), their racism also remains important. Although like the political gangs, the skinheads who form these economic gangs experienced a radicalization of their racism in the mid and late 1980s, they simply choose not to participate in political activism. Nonetheless, they often experienced an indirect effect of increasing politicization, and although they did not meet with Metzger or other adult white supremacists, they still encountered the literature these organizations distributed. As one of PENI's first members describes,
no we didn't have you know regular meetings to talk about politics and that kind of stuff, but it came up informally. We'd look at War's literature and talk about sometimes. (Skinhead Interview q., 11/19/02)

Although these gangs may operate for profit, they are organized around whiteness. Therefore, we should view the subcultural emphases that characterize different phases as influential, but not deterministic. Further, these emphases are not automatic, but must be struggled for. Participants successful in pushing the subculture in one direction may find that detractors are able to conjure support and resources needed to push in another direction. These emphases result from these pushes and should be viewed as accomplishments necessitating nurturance and re-enforcement.

While the popular conception of skinhead gangs associates them with bias-motivated violent attacks (i.e. “hate crimes”), the type of skinhead violence varies according to these subcultural phases. Some organizational affiliations constrain certain behaviors and promote others. For example, during the second-half of the 1990s the Antelope Valley (northeastern Los Angeles County) was struck by a spate of racially-motivated violence. Members from the local branch of the Nazi Lowriders were responsible for much of the violence that resulted in a host of attention directed toward the gang. Law enforcement, including the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the media, schools, and civic organizations placed these incidents under a microscope in an effort to deter further violence and disband the NLR. NLR leaders asked their members in the Antelope Valley to “cool it” as the racist violence was disrupting their more lucrative operations related to the methamphetamine trade. On the one hand, the NLR's racial violence helps infuse the skinhead identity with concrete material practices that sustain views of racial supremacy. On the other hand, this violence hinders their entrepreneurial opportunities by bringing unnecessary attention from law enforcement and the larger community. These tensions also reflect the internal gaps surrounding organizational interests that often exist between leaders and the rank-
and-file. These phases are never completely homogenous, there are always co-existing emphases moving in different directions.

Another example of internal organizational struggles is illustrated by recent developments within PENI. Although PENI seeks a high level of respect with their street savvy and growing connections with several criminal organizations, they also maintain a deeper commitment to racial politics than the NLR and are more “selective” regarding racial criteria related to membership. For example, while the NLR has bestowed membership to individuals with Hispanic backgrounds membership, PENI does not consider Hispanics “truly white”. In spite of these membership requirements, however, PENI is willing to do business with Asian and Hispanic gangs. The lines PENI develops that define who they are as an organization is not always clear.

In 1999, PENI went through a period of discussions regarding whether they should move away from their “white power” philosophy and open up their ranks to “nonwhites”. Others wanted to move in the opposite direction and not only maintain their racist ideology, but embrace a more political stance and scale back their criminal operations. As of now, they remain a racist gang with a “whites only” membership policy, but continue to cultivate criminal operations including doing business with minority gangs. According to several of PENI’s core membership, two factions co-exist within the organization: those who seek a political current and those who want to continue with the economic one. Because these are on-going developments, it is difficult to gauge the organization’s future directions. One possibility is a continuing co-existence of political and economic interests that will eventually coalesce and become strategic and purposive as opposed to incidental.

In this chapter, I have examined the third phase of subcultural development, which is the most recent transition toward economic emphases. Over the course of a little more than two decades, the skinhead subculture has experienced significant changes. During the second phase skinhead gangs were taking to the streets, “spreading the word” and urging “white people to unite” and “take their country back” or build a new “white homeland”.
Marches, leafleting, recruitment on school campuses and television appearances marked the political phase, but it was not long before serious repression ensued and skinheads were faced with a strategic choice: continue highly visible forms of activism or opt for covert means of resistance. Many opted for the latter and it would not be long before another subcultural current began growing. Thus the shift to economic gangs was facilitated by the waning of the previous phase.

As law enforcement steeped up their efforts to disband skinhead gangs, increased arrests ensued and a growing number of skinheads faced incarceration. This experience was pivotal to paving the way for the shift to economic gangs. Once incarcerated, skinhead gangs began developing ties with the AB and helping them with their criminal operations. Most notably, skinhead gangs became involved in the methamphetamine trade. The involvement in the meth trade not only represents the influence of the AB, but also a longstanding relationship between the skinhead subculture and methamphetamines.

What can we learn from this trend toward economic gangs? Well, as one gang specialist put it, “Not all swastikas are alike.” There is significant diversity among racist skinheads and in the dynamic social processes that have marked their emergence and genesis. Some people characterize skinheads as solely political and use terms like “neo-Nazi” which helps perpetuate perceptions of fascist “stormtroopers” working for the “white revolution”. This ignores the existence of economic gangs. There is an important distinction between adopting grievances directed toward minority populations (racism) and adopting a far right political program. The latter refers to the process of politicization, which for skinheads includes a racist identity, but also includes ties to and participation in the white supremacy movement. Currently economic gangs maintain a racist identity, but are not politicized. However, if skinhead subcultural development tells us anything, it tells us that this may change relatively quickly.

Like previous stages significant subcultural diversity continues. Not all strands developed an economic emphasis but instead retained a political orientation, while others
periodically moved between the two emphases. Still others rejected both the overt political stance because it was typically associated with neo-Nazism and economic orientations, because it has been associated with dealing drugs and prison. Instead, some skinheads may be characterized by an emphasis upon cultural style. These skinheads developed an ultra-patriotic, nationalist posture and sought to maintain the "integrity" of the skinhead way of life. Skinhead subcultural development has neither progressed in a continuous direction nor has it ever been completely dominated by one particular emphasis (although, as I argue distinct developmental phases are definitely apparent).
Notes

1 This ambiguity mirrors the larger culture’s uncertainty about how to define whiteness and the often changing boundaries that correspond with racial categories (see Allen 1994; Roediger 1991).
CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

I have argued that the Southern California skinhead subculture has been marked by three phases of development. These phases are characterized by distinct organizational emphases: social, political, and economic. Despite each phase having distinct emphases, they do not simply result from subcultural consensus. Instead, they reflect struggle and contention between different skinhead factions. Opposing ideas about what is important restrict the dominance of any single organizational emphasis.

In chapter four, I discuss the first phase in the early formation of skinheads and their genesis toward social gangs, which began around 1978 and lasted until about 1984. Stylistic experimentation fueled this early development, but was quickly transformed into a collective identity built around shared organizational names, ritual initiation rites (e.g. jump-ins), fraternal relations, semi-hierarchical social roles, and non-specialized, “garden-variety” delinquency (e.g. vandalism, under-age drinking, petty theft). From the beginning, whiteness was important to skinhead identity but not the primary focus. Race became the core organizing principle as skinheads started developing links with domestic and international adult white supremacist organizations. In the earliest phase, gang members held a range of racial views, but one of the most salient revolved around the perception that white youth were increasingly victimized by a host of social forces, such as minority street gangs, educational curriculums characterizing whites as historical “villains,” and changing demographics that would eventually make whites a minority.
In chapter five, I examined the transition to political gangs, which occurred between 1984 and 1994, as skinhead identity became increasingly anchored in race. During this phase, shifting internal dynamics and budding relationships between skinhead gangs and factions of the white supremacist movement (e.g. the White Aryan Resistance [WAR]) helped mobilize episodic racism into a consistent and relatively structured ideology. While earlier skinhead gangs expressed racism, it was not tightly coupled to a political movement's ideology. Part of what helped structure skinhead racism was their participation in white supremacist political activism. Skinheads began to channel racist sentiments in an organized fashion that made sense given the framework skinheads were learning through ties with pre-existing white supremacist activists. Political gangs developed as members constructed a powerful racist ideology that, at least partially, included neo-Nazism, and introduced political currents beyond the neighborhood, township, or city. For instance, while social gangs were focusing upon boundary crossing at the local level (i.e. a member of a rival gang entering their turf), political gangs began to embrace the ZOG discourse, which explained their grievances by invoking the myth of a worldwide Jewish conspiracy. Politicization diminished the importance of previous interests such as territoriality, by introducing relatively abstract notions of space (e.g. state power as opposed the neighborhood) (Brotherton 1999) and connected skinheads to a broader global white supremacist movement.

The alliance between skinheads and other white supremacist organizations has been successful, but not perfect. Some leaders of adult white supremacist organizations have “privately referred to skinheads as ‘punks’ and grumble that they are potential troublemakers” (ADL 1988: 29). Divisions aside, the skinheads have infused the white supremacist movement with youthful activists that were sorely lacking. Yet, the move toward politicization describes a general shift in skinhead subculture and it is not intended to describe a wholesale change that some researchers have implied (c.f. Hamm 1993; Moore 1993). Not all skinhead gangs embraced a political stance. There were outlying currents
that embraced strident racism, but not political activism. Others splintered and formed anti-racist gangs. Still others were ambiguous about race, favoring a “pro-American” ultra-nationalistic stance that often included racism, but veered away from the trend toward neo-Nazism. Despite these outlying currents, the period between 1984 and 1994 coincided with the politicization of the skinhead subculture.

In chapter six, I present the most recent phase in the skinhead subculture: economic gangs. The time-period of this phase is the hardest to specify, but a clear shift toward economic gangs is evident by the late 1990s. Economic gangs combine aspects of both social and political gangs: they are also racist but their primary interests surround profit-oriented criminal activity. While social gangs are more likely to engage in non-specialized delinquent activity, economic gangs bond around a profit-orientation and specialized criminal activity. This movement toward criminalization distinguishes economic gangs’ higher degree of organization and emphasis upon instrumental goals. They neither participate in political activism nor are they as well connected to the white supremacist movement as earlier political gangs. The relationship between racism and criminal activity varies depending upon the specific organization and other factors like the surrounding community. Like political gangs and unlike social gangs, economic ones de-emphasize the importance of physical territory. However, while political gangs desire a re-distribution of power and the creation of new political states (i.e. a white revolution), economic gangs cultivate markets in order to expand business operations. These changes in emphasis were facilitated by three factors.

First, by the late 1980s, highly visible political activism by racist skinheads was drawing notoriety and repression. Police departments and other community organizations began paying more attention to skinhead gangs, using surveillance and arrests to curtail their activities. In response to these efforts, some white supremacist organizations began advocating covert resistance strategies as a way to deflect social control agents. Many skinheads were questioning the effectiveness of public-level activism and opted for less organized or
easily traceable affiliations. The result has not necessarily meant a de-politicization for all skinheads, but rather a de-emphasis on highly visible political activity. This de-emphasis helped create subcultural space for another current to grow. The increasing emphasis on profit-oriented crime has also created the misperception among some law enforcement that political skinhead gangs no longer exist. Also, with political skinheads desiring a quieter existence, there has been a coalescence of interests between economic and political gangs. Both emphasize secrecy to avoid social control and this survival interest has reduced the social and ideational distance between economic and political gangs.

Second, increasing rates of skinhead incarceration inadvertently helped facilitate the change to economic gangs. Law enforcement agencies stepped up their efforts in the late 1980s to halt skinhead activities and disband their gangs. This was largely successful and resulted in the incarceration of a significant portion of skinheads for a wide-range of offenses. Incarceration helped forge new organizational ties with the Aryan Brotherhood, who wanted to recruit young white inmates from the California Youth Authority to assist with their criminal operations. The AB's efforts led to a relationship with skinheads, which is comparable to skinheads' earlier links to WAR. Both the AB and WAR provided skinhead gangs with important network links that influenced their organizational emphases. However, while WAR preached political sophistication in the sense of adopting a global outlook and organization, the AB has preached economic sophistication with an emphasis upon participation in the highly profitable methamphetamine trade.

The third factor that led to economic gangs involved skinheads' paradoxical relationship with methamphetamine. Although skinheads' involvement in the distribution of methamphetamine grew as ties with the AB developed, there is precedence in the skinhead subculture linking them to this drug. The use of methamphetamine has never been as prevalent as alcohol, but some skinheads have used (and sold) this drug since the beginning of the subculture in Los Angeles during the early 1980s. Together, the pre-existing subcultural affection for methamphetamine, the AB's mentoring, and the potential for high
profits have led some skinhead gangs to establish themselves as significant “players” in the methamphetamine trade.

Although a predominant focus on economic gain has developed among skinhead gangs in Southern California, significant subcultural diversity continues. Like previous phases that I identify, not all skinhead gangs developed an economic emphasis, some retained a political orientation, and others periodically moved between the two emphases. Still other skinheads emphasize cultural style, rejecting both political gangs because they have typically been associated with neo-Nazism, and economic gangs, because they have been associated with crime. Changes in the skinhead subculture have neither progressed in a continuous direction nor has the subculture ever been completely dominated by one particular emphasis (although, as I argue, distinct developmental phases are apparent). There are distinct phases, but we should not confuse these phases with the assumption that all skinhead gangs fit neatly into the same category. During each of the phases I identify, some diversity remains. It has been my goal to explain why and how these phases occurred and the implications for the future of skinhead subculture and, more generally, the implications for how we understand subcultural change.

Skinhead Dynamism

There is both continuity and dynamism in organization of subculture (Hatch and Schultz 2002; Takenaka 2002; Zeuner 2001; Moore 1994; Glaser 1968; Becker and Strauss 1956). For example, research on policing subcultures reveals that some traits of this subculture have remained consistent for over five decades (Zhao, He, and Lovrich 1999). While findings that direct attention toward organizational continuity are important, we should not assume that organizational culture is always marked by high levels of permanence. Some observers suggest that to assume organizational stability is to privilege permanence over the ephemeral. For example, gang studies tend to concentrate on those gangs that have achieved some level of organizational success. Yet, most gangs do not
survive much past their initial formation, quickly dissolving, leaving members to find other pre-existing organizations or attempt to create new ones (Klein 1995). In his studies of collective behavior and social movements, Melucci (1989) argues that researchers have perpetuated a myth of the "unified empirical datum" which "supposes that individuals' behavior forms a unitary character or gestalt..." (1989: 18). According to Melucci, there has always been more dynamism than studies focusing upon stabilizing patterns have implied. Melucci (1996, 1989) suggests that the prevalence of organizational change is related to important socio-historical-economic changes that occurred in the latter half of the 20th century. The acceleration of social change leaves organizational forms more susceptible to instability (especially non-institutionalized organizational forms). While scholars have studied and theorized the impact that macro-structural changes (e.g. immigration shifts, new technologies that alter boundaries of time and space etc.) have on how people construct gender, racial, ethnic, religious, and youth identities (Seidman 1997; Castells1996; Hall 1996; Bauman 1995; Gilroy 1993; Gergen 1991), less attention has been devoted to how these processes affect gangs. With the de-stabilization of traditional binary categories, identity is increasingly “hybridized,” consisting of a multiplicity of overlapping selves with “borderless” points of distinction (e.g. the notion of multi-racial, gender categories that are neither male nor female).

Recently, observers have noted changes in traditional gang culture (Starbuck, Howell, and Lindquist 2001), which they refer to as hybrid gang culture. Hybrid gang culture refers to characteristics that, while not completely new to American culture, have clearly flourished in the past decade (Starbuck 2000). Characteristics that mark hybrid gangs include:

- members of different racial/ethnic groups participating in a single gang,
- individuals participating in multiple gangs, unclear rules or codes of conduct, symbolic associations with more than one well-established gang (e.g., use of colors and graffiti from different gangs), cooperation of rival gangs in
criminal activity, and frequent mergers of small gangs (Starbuck, Howell, and Lindquist 2001: P. 1).

While informed by traditional gangs, hybrid gangs are not simply smaller satellite organizations. For example, a hybrid gang may display a symbol associated with a traditional gang without forming any concrete association with that gang. A hybrid gang may also form alliances with rival gangs to carry out criminal activity. These characteristics reflect the hybrid gang's pragmatic organizational style that is not bound by a strong set of absolute codes.

That the formation of hybrid gangs is related to larger changes in the construction of identity has yet to receive sufficient theoretical scrutiny from gang scholars or social theorists. Hybrid identities offer social actors the flexibility to experiment with new previously untried social forms. For example, migrating gang members appear to have contributed to the growth of hybrid gangs in localities where gangs previously had little presence. Migrant gang members acted as cultural carriers of the folkways, mythologies, and other trappings of more sophisticated urban gangs (Maxson, 1998:3). Further, hybrid forms of identity and organization allow seemingly incompatible elements to co-exist without causing serious conflict. For instance, as noted in chapter six, PENI has traded methamphetamine for guns with Asian and Hispanic gangs. Sometimes these incompatible elements not only co-exist but also overlap, providing participants with diverse opportunities for cooperative efforts and even multiple affiliations. For example, skinhead gangs in some locales have affiliations with African-American gangs (Starbuck 2000). Yet, in terms of organizational stability, a high level of flexibility and diversity simultaneously prevents stronger coalescence around a central organizing ideology.

While skinhead gangs are affected by larger socio-historical changes, they are also affected by specific organizational dynamics and characteristics (e.g. changes in leadership, the incarceration of core members etc.). Researchers examining individual deviant careers contend that, in contrast to conventional occupations, instability, non-linear pathways, and
uncertainty characterize deviant ones. While “respectable” careers develop slowly and in a regular progression, deviant careers are rapid, intermittent, episodic, and likely to move in multiple directions. The characteristics of the skinhead subculture bears resemblance to individual deviant careers, which helps explain skinhead dynamism. First, like individual deviants, members of the skinhead subculture cannot usually depend upon legitimate institutional resources for support. The skinhead subculture developed in an illegitimate, non-institutional environment, which is less structured and less stable than legitimate organizations. Second, variation is also affected by the unforeseen events that skinhead organizations face (e.g. the incarceration of key leaders). These events destabilize organizations, which in turn, affect the gang’s objectives, resources, and opportunities (Sanchez-Jankowski 1991). In the absence of a highly developed organizational structure, these contingencies become even more destabilizing. The third factor involves the relatively small size of the skinhead subculture, which, combined with a lack of institutional stability, has meant that a highly structured and regimented organizational form never developed in the way that it has with organizational forms like policing subcultures or even larger and older gangs. Consequently, skinhead gangs never developed into “quasi-institutions” connected to their respective communities (Moore 1991) the way that gangs have in East Los Angeles or Chicago (Venkatesh 2000).

One cause for this lack of institutionalization is that skinheads have never received high levels of community support. In fact, skinheads often experience high levels of conflict with their local communities, including battles with other subcultures (even racist ones) and, of course, social control agents. What these characteristics have facilitated is great flexibility leading to constant change. Instability, small size, and a hostile external environment make future trends especially hard to predict. For example, the links between some skinhead gangs and the Aryan Brotherhood or Hells Angeles may signal an eventual wholesale departure away from politics, or may lead to a pragmatic fusion between crime and politics.
Why is the issue of skinhead dynamism an important issue to consider? First, emphasizing skinhead change captures the empirical reality and suggests the need for new conceptual frameworks to understand the skinheads (and more broadly gangs in general). These new frameworks will require longitudinal data as well as a combination of both qualitative and quantitative methods (Sampson 2000). However, quantitative methods alone will not provide researchers with the type of data they need to better understand gang diversity and dynamism. As Short (1996a: xvii) contends, “systematic and sustained research...based on local knowledge...is necessary if we are to understand gangs.” Further, gang researchers would be well served to use the “career” concept in order to improve the understanding of gang diversity and dynamism. This concept helps frame the different trajectories that may develop within a gang subculture and directs attention toward the relationship between gangs and “macro-level forces ranging from the global to the neighborhood.” (Short 1996b: 221-222)

Second, continuing to neglect the dynamic nature of the skinhead subculture prevents the theoretical possibility of explaining the processes that lead to the emergence, maintenance, and dissipation of skinhead participation (Sampson 2000). My attention toward describing and explaining skinhead dynamism follows Lofland’s (1993: 37) suggestion for “answer-improving” approaches as opposed to “theory bashing,” which he describes as including the practice of “professing allegiance to one [theory]...and zealously pursues campaigns to discredit and banish yet others.” I argue that by examining skinheads and subcultural change, my project contributes to the larger study of street gangs by offering an empirical investigation of a neglected population (i.e. skinheads) and an understudied aspect of gangs (i.e. changes over time). My study highlights the need for theoretical integration than can contribute greater explanatory power (Sampson 2000).

Third, viewing gangs as one-dimensional increases the difficulty of preventing their emergence and diffusion. For example, since the skinheads’ transition toward economic interests, some law enforcement and watchdog observers have posited that political
skinheads are “a thing of the past.” The contention that Los Angeles skinheads are no longer committed to political ideals misunderstands the nature of change within the skinhead subculture, confusing a retreat from public-level political activism with a complete retreat from politics. This misunderstanding ignores the high level of political commitment that continues to exist among segments of the skinhead subculture and the cultivation of political activism that does not require such public forms of participation. A nuanced understanding of skinhead changes and their phases of development offer the possibility of predicting the direction of future growth and what might prevent these trajectories from taking hold.

Skinheads and Racism

What is surprising about skinhead diversity and dynamism is that we typically associate racist groups with right-wing fundamentalism and a desire to create an essentialist identity. Although skinheads have fundamentalist qualities that resemble what Bauman (1995) refers to as “neo-tribal,” skinhead efforts at creating an essential identity have been largely unsuccessful as racism even among skinheads must be continually negotiated. Instead of a clearly bounded and concrete identity, skinheads participate in a subculture characterized by a diverse patchwork of identities and interests. How does skinhead diversity and dynamism help us understand racism? First, even extreme and open racism is far more complex than we often think. Further, the difference between extreme and “everyday racism” (Feagin and Vera 1995; Sykes and Feagin 1994; Wellman 1993) may not be nearly as great as we generally think. The development of skinhead racism represents the transition or logical extension of “everyday racism” where racial epithets are hurled in less extraordinary ways (e.g. coded, yet racist jokes or comments) to explicit racism (e.g. proclaiming that we should “ship all the niggers back to Africa”). The former tends to receive far less attention, not warranting the concern reserved for open racists who make little pretense about their ideological beliefs but who, like the everyday racists, do not necessarily always remain
consistent with their racism. Where disapproval regarding extreme racism is relatively unequivocal, ordinary racism faces a far different set of reactions. This means that social reactions to racism are as much influenced by the “type” of racist as opposed to the type of “racism”. Those not typed as racist may be provided much greater latitude to explore and express potentially racist sentiments without receiving stigmatization. In his study of racial sentiments among whites in Detroit, Hartigan (1999) argues that to fully understand and appreciate the complexity of racism, one must observe the manifestation of the importance of race during what he refers to as “racial situations.” These situations reflect instances where individuals used race as part of an “interpretive process whereby participants judged the interests, intentions, motivations, and actions that composed such encounters” (Hartigan 1999: 14). Similarly, the ways in which skinheads interpret the world is not solely dependent upon a racial discourse, nor are their racial sentiments solely based upon a universal racist ideology. Much like the “rest of us,” skinheads often perceive race through local readings that are unstable, open to negotiation, and change from one reading to the next. This does not mean that skinheads never engage in absolutist, meta-narratives to understand their world; certainly, the popularity of the ZOG discourse contradicts such a notion, but even ZOG is interpreted in a wide-range of different ways. The same skinhead, who emphasizes his/her neo-Nazi affinities in one situation, may describe himself or herself as merely “proud to be white” and only interested in preserving certain aspects of “Euro-American” culture. Readers may react to this claim by attributing these differences as efforts at “impression management” (Goffman 1959), but we should be careful about failing to appreciate these distinctions as authentic articulations of contemporary trends that allow and encourage individuals to identify with a contradictory range of cultural elements and simultaneously the growing anxiety related to losing racial/ethnic/national roots (Bauman 1995).
Limitations and Further Questions

This work is the first sociological study of the skinhead subculture that uses an in-depth longitudinal case study approach. As such, several limitations need to be mentioned. First, I do not include an analysis of gender. Not only do I neglect the role of female skinheads, but I also ignore the construction of masculinity within the skinhead subculture. These omissions reflect my overarching interest in the organizational dynamics of skinhead gangs and how these changed over time. While the construction of masculinity is inextricably linked to the skinhead identity and culture, I was less interested in providing an in-depth analysis of the skinhead belief structure. Previous research has already identified the importance of masculinity to the skinheads and other white racist organizations (Blee 2002; Blazak and Wooden 2001; Ferber 1998; Gibson 1994). In terms of the role of female skinheads, Blee's (2001) work is the most extensive treatment of this topic, but she focuses upon racist activists, a concept that does not necessarily include all skinheads. What is needed is an ethnography devoted to understanding the lives of female skinheads.

Second, I do not provide a sustained analysis of the class aspect of the skinhead subculture. Unlike their British predecessors who came from the low-income and deteriorating East End of London, Los Angeles skinheads represent a cross-section of social class backgrounds. Many Los Angeles skinheads came from middle-class and even upper-class families, resulting in a collage of social classes coalescing around an ideal of the working-class. The skinhead subculture adopted this working-class identity despite the divergent individual backgrounds of its members (Anderson 2001). Once you became a skinhead, you also became a member of the working-class (at least rhetorically, and even then, cleavages would appear at times between those who were really from the working-class and those who had adopted this position). While the process that allowed for this appropriation is a key element to understanding the skinhead subculture, like the role of gender, it is beyond the purview of this study.
The third limitation involves a future direction that I intend pursue. This study's unit of analysis has been the group and subcultural level, a level which necessarily ignores the trajectories of individual participants. Adopting an analysis at the individual level would provide useful insight regarding the process of affiliation and disengagement as well as the effect of participation on a person's biography, but as I explained in the introduction, I felt it was important to begin with an analysis of the subculture\textsuperscript{5}. This type of analysis would also provide an opportunity to assess the relationship between age and levels of participation.

The fourth and most important limitation surrounds the issue of how representative is the Los Angeles skinhead subculture. I selected a case study approach in order to provide the level of depth typically lacking in discussions of skinheads. This depth allowed me the opportunity to describe nuances that would have otherwise been neglected. While this approach resulted in a rich collection of data, the findings are, nonetheless, limited to a relatively small geographic area. The data I collected for this study does not allow me answer the question of whether the skinhead subculture in Portland, Oregon, Atlanta, Georgia, or Detroit, Michigan developed along a similar career path. To answer this question with much certainty requires comparative data derived from several different locales. Without such data, we do not know whether Los Angeles' highly diverse culture and often trend-setting styles are reflected among other skinhead gangs. A comparative design could examine whether the career patterns of skinhead gangs in other locales parallel the Los Angeles skinheads; whether Los Angeles skinheads are largely atypical, or whether they are slightly out-in-front, but with skinhead gangs in other locales following closely behind. However there is evidence suggesting that the most recent patterns I found in Southern California are occurring elsewhere. For example, skinhead gangs in locales such as Las Vegas and Phoenix have been implicated in the methamphetamine trade and Hammerskins recently provided security at a Hells Angels festival, which implies a relatively close relationship, as HA typically handle their own security\textsuperscript{6}. Despite these limitations, this
study offers a great deal of new insight regarding a population that is often misunderstood and/or omitted from serious academic analysis.

Future of the Skinheads

INTERVIEWER: What about the future of the skinheads, what do you see?

METZGER: If we could entice the black gangs and the Mexican gangs and become more aggressive, they would come out of their neighborhood and start attacking more white people, then I think the skinheads would come back into their home territory. Certain types of skinheads, that's what they want to do is have that warfare like that. Which only adds confusion, which is ok with me. The system's idea is to keep those people [minority groups] in those playgrounds like on a plantation, so it's unlikely for a while that they would come roaring out of there doing much. I think elements of the skinheads, they are going right on up and taking our advice. They email me all the time and say, "look I want to do something but I don't want to be a skinhead." Because there is an element of the skinheads that just party and drink and fight. That doesn't get you anywhere (Tom Metzger, 2/20/99).

Metzger's comments suggest two possible pathways of skinhead development. The first is a re-territorialization in response to perceived "non-white" crime patterns where skinheads serve as vigilantes protecting the "white community". The second pathway is the maturation or the institutionalization of individual skinheads who maintain an ideological commitment to a racist agenda without the problems caused by public affiliation with skinhead gangs. Both pathways could exist simultaneously. Younger skinheads may be attracted to the first pathway, embracing the physical aggressive notion of defending territories, while older skinheads may gravitate towards the second and less active pathway. Social class is another factor that might influence skinhead decisions about the adoption of these path-
ways. Lower class, economically disenfranchised skinheads may desire the street warrior status provided by the first pathway, while middle and upper class skinheads might prefer the second pathway that emphasizes intellectual and less physically demanding qualities.

However, I want to suggest the possibility of a third pathway that fuses economics and politics. During the phase of social gangs, most criminal behavior was relatively minor (fighting, under-age drinking, vandalism) which made the transition towards politics in the second phase easier. There was little incentive to maintain petty criminal activity as an emphasis; however, during the third phase skinheads began participating in highly lucrative criminal enterprises, meaning that abandoning these efforts will be unlikely. Yet, a re-emphasis of politics does not necessitate altering these profit-oriented criminal activities. If the political climate remains hostile and political opportunity remains limited, politics and crime may co-exist as revolutionary action. This would require re-framing street crime as political crime and cooperation and coordination between different organizational factions. Skinhead gangs that exhibit a primarily economic orientation would need to feel that political gangs and older white supremacist organization respect them for “who they are”. In other words, if economic gangs perceive political gangs as proselytizing, then there would be little chance for such a merger. This merger also requires a willingness of sharing leadership with the purpose of forming a confederation. While political gangs face the threat of being perceived as preaching, economic gangs would need to be careful about showing the proper respect for members of political gangs who, in some cases, have been active skinheads for over twenty years. Most importantly, a merger would require an ideational convergence between economic and political gangs that recognized the ways in which politics can be monetarily profitable (e.g. the white power music industry) and the important role that resources play in supporting political action.

Through emulation and penetration, many skinhead gangs have recently evolved into a global movement with a global identity. Critical to the global spread of skinhead gangs has been changes in organizational forms. Yet, despite an increasingly global orientation,
skinhead gangs remain relatively small in numbers and their organizations remain insular and detached from legitimate institutions. In keeping with the desire to embed themselves within hidden networks, much of the current political participation centers on the white power music industry. Private house parties, small events at local bars, and larger festival gatherings on private property provide less public forms of resistance than marches and rallies. These events occur in “free spaces” aimed at sustaining skinhead collective identity and providing an open forum for “identity talk” (Hunt and Benford 1994) away from the watchful eyes of social control agents and anti-racist opponents. The skinhead gangs that pursue an economic orientation by forging ties with the Aryan Brotherhood, motorcycle gangs, and even business dealings with “nonwhite” gangs also depend upon maintaining a healthy distance from the forces of social control. If the shared interest in maintaining distance from social controls can help alter the meaning of doing business with minority gangs into a pragmatic and politically necessary enterprise, then this shared interest may lead to a future merging between these differing orientations and help generate a more homogenous subculture.
Notes

1 Thrasher's classic study of Chicago-area gangs in 1927 refers to "hybrid" gangs.

2 For a good review of this literature, see Luckenbill and Best 1981.

3 For a similar argument regarding school administrator's responses to "troublemakers" see Bowditch 1993.

4 I would guess that this project would be most successful if the researcher were female. Male skinheads would likely be even more suspicious if a researcher were taking a "special interest" in female skinheads.

5 Criminological studies of this nature tend to fall under the rubric of "life course" studies (see Sampson and Laub 1993), but date back to the Chicago School's life history approach (c.f. Shaw 1966), while social movement scholars have also used this type of approach to study the lives of individual activists (c.f. Whalen and Flacks 1989; McAdam 1988).

6 This information was obtained during an interview with a gang unit officer from Las Vegas Metro Police Department, 12/12/02 and confirmed by a source at the Federal Bureau of Investigation who analyzes domestic terrorism, 12/15/02.

7 This is not say that marches and rallies never occur, but in Southern California political skinheads are far more immersed in the white power music industry than in organizing public political events. Future research needs to address whether this is true among skinhead subcultures in other locales.

8 The concept of free spaces was originally conceived to discuss left-wing, progressive social movements (see Evans 1980). Recent theorizing has suggested that researchers examine the applicability of this concept to right-wing movements as well (Poletta 1999). See Simi and Futrell 2003 for research that follows this suggestion.


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VITA

Graduate College
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Pete Simi

Local Address:
7875 North Rainbow Boulevard
Las Vegas, Nevada 89131

Home Address:
7875 North Rainbow Boulevard
Las Vegas, Nevada 89131

Degrees:
Bachelor of Arts, Social Science, 1995
Washington State University

Master of Arts, Sociology, 1999
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Dissertation Title: Rage in the City of Angels: The Historical Development of the Skinhead Subculture in Los Angeles

Dissertation Examination Committee
Chairperson, Dr. Barbara Brents, Ph.D.
Chairperson, Dr. Simon Gottschalk, Ph.D.
Committee Member, Dr. Robert Futrell, Ph.D.
Committee Member, Dr. Kate Hausbeck, Ph.D.
Graduate Faculty Representative, Dr. Randall Shelden