

SPECTRUM

SOCIOLOGY

Why the 'skinheads' are in for trouble

The scape-goat kids

THERE HAS ALWAYS been some sort of scapegoat for teenage violence. Today it has found a new label—"the skinheads," gangs of youths whose cult is strangely puritanical, unlike their fashionable predecessors, the Mods.

From London's Mile End looking westwards, and South of the river into Kennington, Camberwell and Peckham for example, you can see what a sociologist would call a phenomenon and what an authoritarian would call hooliganism. Young working class boys, average age 15 to 17, dressed in a spare, inelegant style, but all dressed strictly the same, out in the streets, looking for fights, playing pintables, dancing to Bluebeat music, causing "agro." That's the skinhead term for aggravation, provocation, a state of mind where it doesn't feel good to go to bed without having had a good scrap.

Skinhead style is rigidly conventional, among skinheads. It is a violent reaction against anything that looks like personality indulgence. What really maddens them and starts their shoulders rolling and fists punching, shadow boxing style, is anything "flash." Long hair is flash. "It's soapy and matted. Horrible. That's the greasers." Flowers, frills, colours are anathema. Hippie is a dirty word. The skinheads dress in big boots, called Cherry Reds or Doctor Martin's, which are American and have air bubbles in the soles, soft leather on the top, cost 88



London skinheads: a puritan style

Kelvin Brodie

shillings and are always bought two sizes larger than necessary; or "steels" which have a steel piece shaped like a horseshoe in the toe, and cost less.

They wear slimline braces which clip on to the top of Levi jeans, usually rolled up a fraction, or "army greens" ("they're cheap . . . if you get them torn in a fight or something"). They wear sleeveless V-neck pullovers and their hair is crew cut. They call themselves peanuts as well as skinheads.

Skinheads dance to bluebeat music, or rock-steady—music of West Indian origin which is

solid, punchy and a little soulful. Blues is equated with everything the skinheads are reacting against—longhairs and hippies—and as such is revolting. The music and perhaps the hair is borrowed from Negroes, whom they call Calebs or "Rudies" and whom they leave pretty much alone.

There is a radical difference between skinheads and the mod. For one thing skinheads are really poor kids on the lowest rung in society, who work all day, and trappings like scooters do not begin to figure in their lives. Unlike mods

they are totally unpretentious, unambitious; they do not stand for anything except part-time violence, or making the most out of living around a tough and violent environment where there has never been any pretence of love or peace.

It is hard to tell whether skinhead violence is more extreme, more widespread and frenzied than any of the other classified youth movements starting with the Teddy Boys of the 50s, or whether it is just another ritualisation for the violence that will always surround youths who live in areas and under circumstances where it is difficult not to build up a massive resentment against society.

With the hardness comes an acid nihilism, more outright disgust than suspicion, of the things they see around them. But all that is mixed with a contagious humour. The question of politics is met with derisive obscenities, "they're all thieving, lying bastards, the lot of them. Labour, conservative, liberal, there's no difference. It's all a load of bottle merchants." School was a subject that brought real expression to the lips of the skinheads. "We were never there when we did go to school." "All I did was kick the teacher."

In a youth club in Peckham a group who described themselves as the Millwall skinheads swore that they never went out looking for violence or trouble. "But if it comes, we're gonna get stuck in. The Brixton lot came down the other night from the Ramjam club. We stuck together and gave them a kicking." "We rely on our boots. We don't carry knives or anything."

Whether the skinheads go out looking for it or not, they're unlikely to go for a week without a fight. Groups from other areas get reputations, there are rumours that one gang defeated another, and then retaliation is called for. The skinheads have a hard image for the outside world—and between themselves—which they couldn't bear to lose.

James Fox