

The Process of Radicalization: Right-Wing Skinheads in Quebec

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Introduction

- Skinheads as an understudied phenomenon in Canada and especially in Quebec.
- Most of the available research dates back from the 1990s or the early 2000s and deals with a specific context, a specific group, or specific elements attributed to skinhead subculture (music, clothing codes, physical and linguistic postures...)
- Literature on the Skinhead “subculture” and its limits.

Objective and Concepts

- This paper focuses on the radicalization process of right-wing Skinheads in Quebec.
- Skinhead as a fuzzy category → great heterogeneity of Skinhead groups that differ in terms of their structure and composition and in the ideas and values they promote:
 - Right-wing Skinhead groups
 - Left-wing Skinhead groups (RASH, SHARP and *Anti-fa*)
 - “Non-political” or traditional Skinhead groups
 - Gay and Lesbian Skinhead groups
- Skinheads as «social movement» and «oppositional groups»

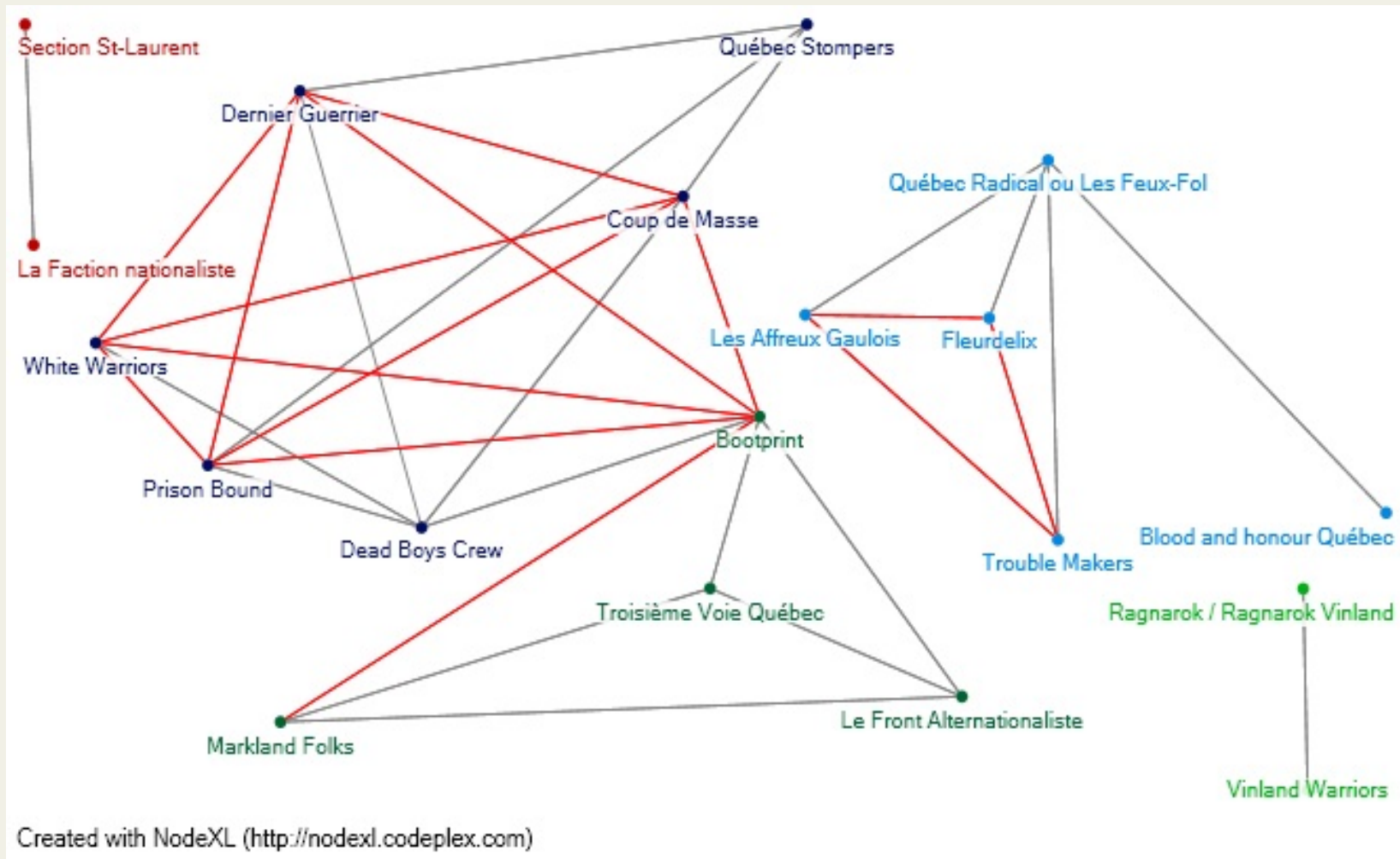
Main argument of the paper

- Right-wing Skinhead groups in Quebec are extremely fragmented and volatile.
- The process of radicalization of their members is highly individualized and their journey towards extremism depends not only on the contexts of socialization, but also on the structuration of the group to which they belong.

A few words of methodology

- Qualitative Methods:
 - Screening the Internet to draw a preliminary portrait and identify some groups and persons of interests.
 - Court sentences = right-wing Skinheads who had been convicted of criminal offenses (Quicklaw).
 - Semi-structured interviews (7 so far)
 - Challenges in doing fieldwork:
 - Context of mistrust → Researchers accused of spying for Left-wing organizations or the police; physical threats....
 - Difficult to make observations in the field → culture of secrecy and mistrust.

The galaxy of right-wing Skinhead groups in Quebec



The galaxy of right-wing Skinhead groups in Quebec

- Skinhead groups as highly fragmented and segmented. Why?
 - Notions of “waves”;
 - Role of the leader personality;
 - Conflict within groups and between groups;
 - Lack of visibility in the real, or physical, sphere.

The radicalization process of right-wing Skinhead in Quebec

- Contentious approach towards radicalization = mechanism-based approach.
- Radicalization as a very individualized and context-sensitive process.
- Our results show that the intra-group dynamics are central in the maintenance of extremist beliefs. In some cases, they also influence the pathways towards extremism.
- The role of beliefs is extremely hard to determine, but in most of the cases under study, they played little, if no, role.
- All our interviewees expressed a fascination for violence. Violence seems to be simultaneously a central motivation, a daily practice and a value.

- **Environmental mechanisms**

- *Primary and secondary contexts of socialization to right-wing extremist ideas*

- Family, social networks in school and after graduation, peer groups, and mass media are powerful socialization and learning contexts in which opinions and attitudes form and change.
 - Family context → transmission mechanism and passive process of radicalization, followed by a more active phase in some cases (network of friends, active learning process...)
 - Family context → rejection mechanism and generational clash: rejection of values transmitted in the family context, rejection of « the society » as a whole.

“We will never die; we will always be there, to frighten you, to [bother you]!!!! [Facebook, group Z]

- *Right-wing skinhead groups as marginalized context of socialization*
 - Trust, a culture of secrecy, and the need for (semi)-clandestinity constitute core rules that shape the environment in which skinheads are socialized.
 - Semi-clandestinity and climate of isolation that are both cohesive and destructive for the group: cohesive in that it reinforces trust, solidarity and control; destructive as it generates never-ending tensions and constraints.
 - Role of violence in structuring the group Violence is less and less used against “the others”, but represents both a practice that structure the group and a environment that shapes it → de-inhibition mechanism.

- **Cognitive mechanisms**

- *Pathways towards extremism: the weak role of ideology*

- Most of our informants had difficulty in clearly expressing, organizing, and structuring their ideas. Only some of them mentioned being engaged in an active learning process or were able to coherently answer questions on how their opinions had been formed and transformed.
 - Role of music, friendship, violence and a sense of solidarity as forces driving the radicalization process.

– *Pathways to acceptance of extremism: a blurred message*

- Role of symbols and music as conveyors of meanings.
- Ideology is not fixed and the degree of ideological volatility is high.
- Message and frames are group-specific, they appear to be the result of very personal combinations of diverse references → Example: the meanings given to the term *patriotism*.
- Weak ideologisation mechanism

– *The maintenance of beliefs*

- The cohesive nature of the group and its semi- (or full) clandestinity may explain why beliefs and frames are transmitted within the group boundaries and persist over time.
- Victimization mechanism and maintenance of beliefs even for those who left Skinhead groups, sometimes years ago.

- **Relational mechanisms**

- *The dynamics of intra-group interactions*

- Skinhead group as a « bunch of friends » looking for fun.
 - Role of the network of friends in joining a Skinhead group.
 - Skinhead group as a new family
 - But drawing a clear picture of the dynamics of intra-movement interactions and their influence on the radicalization process is difficult given:
 - The heterogeneity of Skinhead groups;
 - Their diverse strategies of recruitment;
 - The importance of their leaders' personality
 - The average age of their members.

– *The relationships to the « outside world »:*

- Their main enemies are said to be left-wing militants;
- Role of “usual suspects”
- Fear of the police, as most of our interviewees were arrested and convicted in the past.
- Victimization and development of conspiracy theories.
- Frustration and resentments expressed against « society » as a whole, but also and more surprisingly, against their peers.

Conclusive remarks

- Radicalization is above all a contingent process rooted in individual and collective trajectories.
- We identify four ideal-typical processes of radicalization:
 1. From passive cognitive radicalization to active cognitive and behavioral radicalization;
 2. From active cognitive radicalization to behavioral radicalization;
 3. Contingent behavioral radicalization without cognitive radicalization;
 4. From behavioral radicalization to cognitive radicalisation.

- Do right-wing Skinheads represent a threat to society? In a context where groups are loosely structured and frustration is overtly expressed, should we fear a lone-wolf scenario?
- The answers to these questions seem to be « no », given the apathy within Skinhead groups and their « weaknesses », but it remains of course extremely difficult to predict any sort of violent behavior.

“I went [to a concert]. I was curious and I’ll tell you, it hasn’t changed [from the 80s, when he was part of this circle], in the sense that it is so disarranged, the movement, so ... democracy, they made sure that all split, that there are no ... nothing that connects, that people hold together. Forget it, there is no danger [of any threat]. There are 50, in a room and they look like stupid people and they fight each other and people are drunk. What do you want to do with that? You can’t do anything, there is no danger. We are not in the United States here ... As for me, and from what I know, it is a pity. I was embarrassed to see them act like that”

(Interview, respondent 4, 2013)