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Understanding Dislocal Urban Subcultures. The Example of the Hardcore Scene, from Tokyo and Beyond

ALAIN MUELLER

Center for Ethnography |University of California at Irvine | USA*

ABSTRACT

This article examines, through several ethnographic examples taken from my empirical multi-sited fieldwork, the logics and the mechanisms of the global circulation of a specific music-based "youth subculture": hardcore punk. More broadly, it proposes a shift of perspective in the examination of similar phenomena by adopting (1) a stance that refuses to consider entities such as "cultural areas", "subcultures", "cultural" and "subcultural identities", "local" and "global" as taken-for-granted analytical concepts, but rather considers them as the result of continual actions by social actors who create and maintain such loci of action; (2) a method that allows us to focus on the mechanisms of circulation themselves rather than on the modalities of "delocalization" and "relocalization", mainly by tracking ideas, conventions, people and material objects. From this perspective and on the basis of my ethnographic material, I demonstrate to what extent and under which modalities the hardcore scene takes the form of a global network bounding different units of social situations.

*Center for Ethnography, Social and Behavioral Sciences Gateway (SBSG) UC Irvine, Irvine, CA 92697-5100, USA

INTRODUCTION

This article aims to examine the logics and the mechanisms of the global circulation of a specific music-based "youth subculture": *hardcore punk.*[1] More broadly and on the basis of multi-sited fieldwork, it aims at proposing a shift of perspective in the examination of similar phenomena by adopting a method that allows a focus on the mechanisms of circulation themselves rather than on the modalities of "delocalization" and "relocalization". This shift of perspective resonates with Latour's stance; as he argues, "Circulation is first, the landscape 'in which' templates and agents of all sorts and colors circulate is second." (Latour, 2005, p. 196).

Although initial studies on "youth subcultures" (see *e.g.*, Clarke, 1976; A. Cohen, 1955; P. Cohen, 1972; Gordon, 1947; Hall and Jefferson, 1976; Hebdige, 1979; McRobbie and Garber, 1975) were not overly concerned with the issue of circulation, various sets of cultural activities and "shared understandings" (Becker and Faulkner, 2005) such as the hippy movement, and later on *punk* and *skinhead* subcultures, both precursors of hardcore punk, started very soon after their creation to travel globally. Although it took them a long time to react, scholars could not stay unconcerned about the intensification of the circulation of subcultures and their extension to different places other than those in which they first appeared. Unfortunately, studies examining processes of circulation related to youth subcultures carry with them a resilient tendency in social sciences: a very compartmentalized conception of "culture" (Beck, 2000), and therefore a "naturalized association of culture with place" (Gupta and Ferguson, 1999, p. 35). This tendency, though, has come under increasing criticism in recent years and rightly so (See *e.g.*, Appadurai, 1992, 1996; Baumann, 1996; Gupta and Ferguson, 1999; Glick-Schiller and Wimmer, 2002). Indeed, most studies, which analyze the circulation of youth subcultures to date, still take a localized "cultural origin" of the subculture under study for granted (mostly Great Britain or the United States) and look at the "adaptations" of these practices in other "local cultural settings". Within this perspective, the circulation of subcultures is therefore analyzed as a process of "cultural borrowing" which also involves processes of "indigenization" (see for *e.g.*, Condry, 2006 for hip hop in Japan or Harris, 2000 for metal]. In addition to this tendency to associate "culture" and "place", this approach presents another problem, which is a corollary of it: it fails to account the mechanisms of circulation themselves. In other words and to use a metaphor, observing a train starting from, and arriving at, a railway station does not tell us a lot about the nature of the travel.

By examining ethnographic examples taken from my multi-sited fieldwork (Hannerz, 2003; Marcus, 1995, 2006), I will explore the construction of hardcore-related "mediascapes" (Appadurai, 1996), which globally distribute hardcore as a specific "imagined community" (Anderson, 1991). Through an analysis of the circulation of discourses, conventions, people and material things, I will show that a break with most theories on the circulation of music-based youth subcultures can be very

[1] As usual in ethnographies, I italicized vernacular terms and expressions. However, in order to avoid over using italics, as some of these words and expression frequently appear in the text, this applies only when they are introduced for the first time.

fruitful. Indeed, from this standpoint, my perspective refuses to consider entities such as "cultural areas", "subcultures", "cultural" and "subcultural identities", "local" and "global" as pre-given, taken-for- granted notions, but rather considers them as outcomes, as results of continual actions by social actors who create and maintain such *loci* of action. Such a perspective thereby endeavors to account for those practices in a detailed ethnographic manner. This alternative approach already takes shape at a very basic level: trying to summarize, as an inevitable introductory task, what hardcore punk is.

WHAT IS HARDCORE? DRAWING A DYNAMIC PORTRAIT

Research on "subcultures" most of the time suffers from "groupism" (Brubaker, 2006, p. 2) and thus neglects to show that "subcultural groups' boundaries" are in fact constantly constructed, performed and negotiated by social actors (Fine and Kleinman, 1979). Consequently, by considering "subcultures" as groups existing *per se*, scholars often still propose a formal definition by articulating fragments of "native" sources of information but neglect the fact that these sources are the products of processes of negotiation.

In the case of the *hardcore scene*, a large extent of the ideas of what hardcore is, is continuously moving and negotiated between *hardcore kids*, even if most of them agree on a basic formal definition, which is more or less stable as it is fixed in textual sources. What follows is therefore not an attempt to define hardcore exhaustively or objectively, nor to reconstruct its history. Instead, I present an outline of stories and discursive categories that constitute some of the dominant "shared understandings" of hardcore kids worldwide, circulating in (and beyond) the hardcore scene and mediated through records, books, films and the Internet.

Hardcore originated in North America. This youth subculture is an American reinterpretation of postwar British youth subcultures of the 1960s and 1970s, especially those of the *punks* and *skinheads*, and is characterized by implicit or explicit ideological/political positions held by its participants, which have consistently expressed suspicion and hostility towards consumer and media cultures. Thus, these participants often actively discourage access to and representation of their collective practices and commodification of their musical productions by major music companies. From a musical point of view, hardcore punk is a more aggressive form of punk rock, mixing fast parts with heavy breakdowns; frequently, the vocals are aggressively screamed, reflecting the content of the lyrics. Although these fundamental elements remain, currently, there are different subcategories of hardcore punk music, which differentiate themselves through the combination of different musical influences stemming from other musical styles, mainly metal and rap.

Some of the hardcore kids associate hardcore with specific *lifestyles*, like *straight edge*, which consists in the abstinence from drugs, alcohol, smoking and promiscuous sexuality, or a commitment to a vegetarian or vegan diet. Worldwide hardcore is also characterized by musical events, *hardcore shows*, which are concerts where different styles of a very aggressive way of dancing called *violent dancing* or *moshing* are often

performed. This type of dancing also constitutes a possibility for different local groups of friends, called *hardcore crews* and affiliated with a specific name – like the 168 Crew from Tokyo for instance –, to defy each other. The production pattern of hardcore goods and commodities, *i.e.*, records, CDs, books and *fanzines* but also bands' merchandizing products like T-shirts or stickers, relies on the idea of *DIY* (*do-it-yourself*) which means that these commodities have been created by hardcore kids themselves, in accordance with the "traditional" hardcore precept *by the kids for the kids*, *i.e.*, without the aid of non-hardcore professionals belonging to the mass-media industries in general and large music labels in particular.

FIRST CONTACT

When starting my research on hardcore, the rather naïve idea that originally motivated it was to examine how hardcore was reconfigured in a "non-Western culture". I therefore decided to undertake empirical work in Japan. The first fieldwork experience I had in Tokyo appeared to be very decisive for my overall stance and research question. When I arrived in Tokyo for the very first time, in 2005, I was not able to communicate in Japanese, experienced exoticism and had to grapple with the status of being a complete foreigner. However, a couple of days after my arrival, upon entering a music club in Yokohama to attend my first Japanese hardcore show, these feelings of discomfort immediately faded away, as I myself was a "member" of the hardcore scene and pretty much turned out to feel "at home". The configuration of the show was similar to what I had experienced in Europe: a small club, different *hardcore distros*, (independent CDs and record distributors) and most of the records for sale were familiar to me. When the first band started to play, the crowd began to dance in the *mosh pit*, *i.e.*, the dance floor, to *stagedive* and to grab the microphone to sing along, and all this in a way that was very familiar to me.

This first experience made me realize that the Tokyo hardcore scene reveals logics of movement and meaning that are not properly assimilated to national or local[2] categories or essences. This constituted the first data that inductively helped me to realize that social actors who were involved in the hardcore scene were engaged in continual activities to create and maintain the hardcore scene as a global phenomenon, thus wittingly deciding not to perform other registers of identities, like ethnicity or "national culture". By adopting an ethnomethodologically informed vocabulary, such as contemporary research on ethnicity or gender proposes (see *e.g.*, Moerman, 1974 and Brubaker, 2006 on ethnicity; and West and Fenstermaker, 1995 and Hirschauer, 1996, 2001 on gender), one could also formulate that they were able to engage in processes of "undoing Japaneseness". From this reversed perspective, the belonging to both "the Japanese culture" and "the worldwide hardcore subculture" had to be understood as routinely engaged accomplishments and accounted for through "relational, processual, dynamic, eventful, and disaggregated terms" (Brubaker, 2006, p. 11). In addition to this fundamental recasting of my stance, this fieldwork experience also raised a central question: through which paths and according to which mechanisms were all of these objects and ideas related to hardcore, that I found in Europe and Tokyo, circulating?

[2] Here 'local' should be understood as a homogenous cultural context with clear spatial delimitations.

Answering this question required rigorous tracking of such mechanisms. This task would enable me to better understand how hardcore, as a set of conventions and values, globally circulates. With this new research question settled, I now had to reframe my methodology.

A GROUNDED METHODOLOGY

To properly account for the "native"'s strategies and accomplishments, my project had to proceed inductively. Therefore, my methodology was generally based on the model of grounded theory as proposed by Glaser and Strauss (1967).

In order to achieve a productive methodological triangulation – according to Denzin's idea of Between-method triangulation (Denzin, 1970, pp. 297-313; see also Flick, 2004) – different methods and approaches were adopted. My research relied first of all on participant observation and ethnography. However, the specificity of my research question required the development of a method able to track processes of circulation. I therefore opted for a multi-sited inspired perspective (Hannerz, 2003; Marcus, 1995, 2006). My research thus took me to Japan (particularly Tokyo), as previously mentioned, but also Switzerland (particularly the areas of Zurich and Western Switzerland), New York, Los Angeles, the Ruhr Area in Germany, Gothenburg and other "hardcore places". All these locations became a laboratory to question the mutual construction of hardcore as a transnational and translocal *rhizome* (Deleuze and Guattari, 1998, p. 23). I therefore undertook an ethnography on the move (Marcus, 1998, p. 3), with the intention of tracking the people and artefacts involved in the circulation of hardcore, *i.e.*, who and what they are, where they come from, where they go and along which paths. Furthermore, as a "member" of the hardcore scene myself, I extended the use of ethnography with a narrative method, which has been discussed under the term of "analytic autoethnography" (Anderson, 2006). This enabled me to consider my own life history as data. This ethnographic work has been completed by an extensive amount of open informal interviews and life-history-related narrative interviews.

The fact that ethnography can only account for a section of reality was, thus, not seen as a negative feature of this method but as its force. My research was deliberately an "ethnography of the particular" (Abu-Lughod, 1991) so as to minimize effects of generalizations and premature categorizations from which previous research on the circulation of youth subcultures seems to suffer.

HARDCORE PATHS

In order to better understand the mechanisms and the routes of the flows linking the different locales where hardcore is performed and constructed, let me provide some ethnographic examples of tracking. Firstly, in order to account for "hardcore migrations", I will outline the biography of Emi, a young Japanese girl who decided to migrate to "follow hardcore". I will also demonstrate that hardcore kids move constantly, by examining other examples of "hardcore migrations" over shorter

periods of time and on smaller scales.[3] Secondly, I will propose different ethnographic glimpses of objects that circulate, especially T-shirts, Videos and CDs.

HARDCORE PEOPLE'S PATHS: EMI'S BIOGRAPHY

I met Emi for the first time at a huge hardcore festival in Belgium organized by the label Good Life Recordings during the summer of 2002. We met by coincidence, both of us waiting in a queue to buy vegetarian burgers and soya milk. We exchanged some words and I learned that she had just moved from Japan to Germany in order to live her passion for hardcore in an area, the Ruhr Area, which at that time had an increasing reputation for its dynamic and lively hardcore scene. "*It was pretty much because of the hardcore scene in the Ruhrpott that I moved to Germany*" she told me later. We kept in contact after the festival, which enabled me to trace her life's history. The second time I met Emi was in New York, seven years later. This gave us the occasion to discuss her experiences since we last met. She told me:

> "I started to get my tattoos after I moved to Germany. And my parents didn't like them for sure. But I didn't show them when walking around, and they couldn't hate it so much […] Then I moved to London, where I attended a school to become a make-up artist. And then I moved to New York. I love New York. It looks pretty much like Tokyo. Now I have loads of friends in the hardcore scene here." (Interview, 11.06.2009, English original)

This first example, with its glimpses of hardcore's conventions and dynamics, is very telling and representative of many similar biographies I encountered during my research. First, it shows that actors engage themselves in what can be called a "hardcore career", in the sense accorded to it by authors affiliated to the Chicago School (see *e.g.*, Barley, 1989; Becker, 1973; Becker and Strauss, 1956; Hugues, 1997). This career is characterized by a constant effort to successfully take steps towards gaining credibility and recognition within the "hardcore world" and its dynamics. It therefore also relies on a "native" currency constantly calibrating and negotiating what gives credit and what discredits. One of the dimensions, which is highly promoted in this quest is the "native" notion of living a *hardcore lifestyle*. This means that one's life has to be focused on hardcore only and for this other domains of activities (family, professional) have to be excluded or sacrificed. Within this frame, mobility and nomadism, in order to "follow hardcore wherever this road leads", constitute an important value, as Emi's career illustrates and is also manifest in the lyrics of hardcore bands:

> This is a worldwide thing! All across the world I say to you, my friends! Thanks for all the love, for always staying true. Now it's a worldwide thing. [...] From New York to the west coast. All across the lands. Overseas in Europe, and Japan, Australia to New Zealand, to South America, here we go again. Now it's a worldwide thing!" (Madball, 2005, "Worldwide")

As we see in the lyrics, these values of connectivity and mobility are a central part in one of the other main values promoted in hardcore, which is the idea of unity and

[3] For obvious reasons, *i.e.,* limited amount of words in this article, I decided to leave gender aspects aside. Nevertheless, this does not affect the main line of argumentation and general ideas I am developing here (see Schulze, 2011).

friendship among hardcore kids worldwide and the strong wish to communicate and stay connected. This idea is also constantly promoted by individual discourses. For example, Kentaro, the singer of a band from Tokyo called Crystal Lake, told me: "The values linked to it (Hardcore) are to connect many hardcore kids in the world. We can share this worldwide movement."

Apart from Emi's biography, there are many other examples of short, medium, or long-term "hardcore migrations" which I gathered during my extended fieldwork that verify this thesis. For example, one of my interlocutors in Tokyo moved from the rural countryside to Japan's capital for its hardcore scene and now regularly travels to the United States to attend hardcore shows and festivals there and to spend time with his American hardcore friends. The Tokyo hardcore scene also attracts foreigners, who sometimes come especially for an annual festival, or even decide to live in Tokyo for a longer period of time, a choice in which the Tokyo hardcore scene turns out to be a decisive criterion. For example, on my first stay in Tokyo, I met a Swedish student doing an academic exchange for one year who had just had a 168 (the name of a local crew) freshly tattooed on his wrist. Following the end of his academic year, he regularly travelled back to Japan to meet up with his Japanese hardcore friends. Whilst in Tokyo, I also met a Canadian girl living there who worked as an English Language teacher for two years before moving to London. In her case too, her hardcore network was decisive in this choice. During my entire stay in Tokyo, I met numerous other people from the United States and Europe who also became part of the Tokyo hardcore scene. In addition to these itinerant individuals, I also observed a constant flow of bands, from various countries like Italy, Germany, the United States or the Netherlands, playing one or more gigs in Tokyo during their tours.

Although hardcore kids are generally resourceful and travel relatively cheaply – by staying at friends' places, traveling via low budget transportation, even sometimes shoplifting – and are prepared to reduce other living expenses and invest their money solely in traveling, long- distance travel is only undertaken by a certain proportion of them for obvious professional and financial reasons. However, even if required to occur on a smaller scale, due to limited resources, movement remains central to hardcore kids' activities. It is common for hardcore kids to drive for between two to eight hours to attend shows. In Tokyo it took, for example, an average of one hour by public transport whereas in Switzerland it takes an average of two hours' travel to get to a show. In sum, exchanges and circulation of people, as I observed in Tokyo, appear to be incessant and therefore a fundamental characteristic of hardcore.[4] Indeed, these flows which I have described for Tokyo are no exception but can be similarly observed in all other "hardcore places" of different sizes such as New York and the West Coast of the United States, Central Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium amongst others in Western Europe, South America, Australia, Japan and

[4] This point raises the question of the minimum material and financial means, which are necessary to undertake these travels, and indirectly the question of the social milieu hardcore kids come from. Although I cannot fully explore this question here, a basic tendency emerges: in post-industrial societies, where the possibility of travelling at low costs, of having access to the Internet and of listening to, or playing, music is nearly affordable by anyone, hardcore kids come from all kind of milieus. In other 'hardcore places', which are inscribed in other types of societies, for example South East Asia, being involved in the hardcore scene might imply coming from a relatively privileged milieu.

other countries in South East Asia, especially Malaysia, Thailand and the Philippines. One way to draw this "hardcore map of the world" is to look at the tour schedules of bands, who often wish to play in as many as possible places around the world. The following flyer for the world tour of a band from Boston called Have Hearts can be taken as a revealing example:

Figure 1: The flyer for the world tour of Boston's Have Heart (Taken from the website http://www.myspace.com/haveheart).

THE PATHS OF HARDCORE THINGS: IMPORT/EXPORT

However, the circulation related to the hardcore scene is not only based on people. The circulation of "hardcore things" also constitutes an important aspect of the existence of hardcore, as much for the collective construction of a "hardcore identity" as for the success of a hardcore career on an individual basis. To make a link with my previous example, the lyrics of the bands, which are one of the main vehicles and sources for hardcore's repertoire of ideological conventions, also constantly circulate. They move mainly through the circulation of records or CDs, in which they are

nearly systematically printed, and they are also, most recently, distributed through the Internet. In order to better understand the mechanism of the circulation of hardcore things, let me examine a set of examples.

The first example leads us to Tokyo again. My first visit to one of the only two record stores selling hardcore records, CDs and T-shirts in Tokyo somehow thrilled me. I was astonished to discover that I could find almost any newly released CD I could think of, including many by European bands. Whereas a couple of days before I had been so proud to offer my new Japanese friends the newest CDs released by the two most popular Swiss hardcore bands, thinking it would look like a small treasure to them, I now found myself standing in this store, staring at piles of these same CDs. Similarly, the Tokyo hardcore kids also export their musical production: with the help of websites like Myspace they constantly trade their CDs through intensive contacts with other hardcore kids and distros around the world. I myself became a vector of this circulation. When departing, instead of bringing typical Japanese gifts back to Switzerland, my luggage was filled with numerous CDs and DVDs of the bands affiliated to the 168 Crew to sell them in Switzerland but also with things I bought for myself: buttons, stickers and T-shirts of Japanese bands, whom I befriended during my stay. In exchange, my friends in Japan started to sell my band's CD and also to wear the T-shirt of my band on pictures circulating on the Internet. The possession of these objects were, for me, as much as for them, a source of credibility, because they are the tangible evidence that we were committed enough to hardcore to, first of all, know underground hardcore bands from different places around the world, secondly, to move around the world to discover them, and thirdly, to support them by buying and selling their material in accordance with the DIY principle.

This process of valorization of the possession of rare hardcore objects can be better understood when tracking the Japanese CDs on their route to Europe. Indeed, sometime after I came back from my first stay in Japan, my band played together with a band from New York called 25 Ta Life, which toured in Europe for a couple of weeks. 25 Ta Life is a band known for its singer: Rick Ta Life. Rick has built his reputation in the hardcore scene since the mid-1990s by being "true to the game" and by claiming it in his songs but also by living an hardcore lifestyle, working "only for the scene", by running a not-for-profit distro and record label. Before the show started, it took him two hours to install his enormous table full of CDs of bands from all around the world, band T-shirts, VHS cassettes, DVDs, etc. Our table, placed next to his, was ridiculous in comparison: it only presented a couple of CDs and T-shirts of our band, plus the Japanese CDs I had brought with me. "Hey what is this?" Rick asked me. "These are Japanese bands," I answered. "What do they sound like?" and the conversation went on until he offered me five compilations of his label in exchange for this new "treasure" he found and would proudly sell, two minutes after our exchange, in his distro with an "underground aggressive HxC[5] str8[6] from Japan" label quickly written with a marker onto sticky tape. And this is how the Japanese CDs kept on traveling through Europe and later onto the United States.

[5] HxC is a vernacular abbreviation of hardcore.
[6] Vernacular abbreviation of straight.

Here again, for Rick Ta Life, the newly acquired Japanese hardcore CDs would valorize his commitment to hardcore. They enabled him to broaden his offerings on his merchandise table and at the same time they would signal to other hardcore kids his ability to obtain these things and in this embody his extensive degree of connectivity to other hardcore kids around the world. In this sense, his merchandise table would become a mirror for his hardcore career. These examples enable us to better understand the extent to which the circulation of hardcore artefacts is essential for the collective construction of a "hardcore identity" and the manner in which it constitutes an important factor in the success of a hardcore career.

MORE THAN "CULTURAL BORROWINGS" AND "INDIGENIZATION": A SHIFT OF PERSPECTIVE

In conclusion, my intention has been to show, with the example of hardcore, how as a translocal, constantly circulating phenomenon, subculture(s) can be theorized without involving the misconceptions of previous research. For this, I proposed a shift of perspective from a localized study to a study which combines the examination of (1) various local places where hardcore is produced and performed and (2) the flows between these places. On the basis of the example of the migration and mobility of persons and the circulation of objects in hardcore, I have shown that these processes are much more than simple translations from a source to a target where it is indigenized to adapt to the "local cultural context". I argue that paying closer attention to the dynamics which are specific to the subcultures under study (in my case hardcore and the logic of what I call "hardcore careers") enables a better understanding of the processes of circulation that they simultaneously engender and rely on.

As my data shows for the case of the hardcore scene, this circulation takes the form of a global network linking different units of social situations. Therefore, hardcore appears to be a *dislocal*, or dislocated phenomenon, constantly "localizing the global and globally redistributing the local" (Latour, 2005) and therefore challenging the pertinence of the analytical distinction between "local" and "global".

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alain Mueller is currently Visiting Research Associate at the Center for Ethnography, University of California at Irvine. He obtained his PhD from the Anthropology Institute of the University of Neuchâtel, Switzerland. His thesis, entitled "Worldwide United: Constructing the World of Hardcore", examines the processes of circulation within the transnational network of hardcore punk subculture.