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Book Review: Picciolini's White American Youth

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Abstract
This article reviews Christian Picciolini's White American Youth (2017), a memoir of a former white supremacist punk musician who co-founded the non-profit organization Life After Hate.

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Review

In Christian Picciolini's *White American Youth* (2017), the author, a former white nationalist punk musician who founded his band W.A.Y (White American Youth), tells us how he was inducted into and later managed to leave the white power movement and form *Life After Hate,* a non-profit organization dedicated to helping people to exile out of violent far-right movements (p. 129, 264). Picciolini decided to write a memoir to help readers understand how someone can become a white nationalist and then reinvent oneself as an anti-racist. In fact, Picciolini's memoir matches a deradicalization model known as the *Phoenix model,* since Picciolini undergoes an *identity transformation* that involves three filters: trust, perceived opportunity, and security (Silke et al., 2021; 313). The Phoenix model refers to the deradicalization process, in which external factors encourage an extremist to undergo an identity transformation through a range of catalyst factors, which are actor catalysts (such as family & friends, formers, and program interventions), psychological catalysts (disillusionment and mental health) and environment catalysts (prison) (314-316). Along with the Phoenix model, Picciolini's memoir follows the themes of many former extremists in a 2017 study, in which 87 informants share their experiences that includes *push-and-pull* factors; the most common reasons for 'push' consists of the disillusionment with tactics and

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members, while for the 'pull' includes concern for the family's well-being and material rewards (Altier et al., 2017; 309).

We learn about Picciolini's childhood, a loner who suddenly became popular after he violently defeated another student who kept tormenting him at Catholic school, as well as his teenage years as he slowly became a white nationalist at 14 after befriending a few white skinheads, such as white nationalist terrorist Clark Martell who influence Picciolini to join the movement, and his early adulthood, when he realized over time the problems he endured *worsen* from white nationalism. Picciolini often notes how his constant feelings of loneliness and inferiority lead him to white supremacists, as he felt more powerful through his punk skinhead fashion and violence, from physically assaulting young men of color to Picciolini illegally obtaining a firearm. Picciolini felt like he was fighting for a cause as he formed a punk band and toured in Europe and North America, selling skinhead albums and merchandise from his independent store (Picciolini, 2017; 221, 227-228). The masculinity, ideal-militancy, violence, and excitement made Picciolini radicalize into a white supremacist, especially since Picciolini tried to join the military, as he desired a sense of heroism (Bjørgo, 2011, 9; Picciolini, 2017, 143).

The deradicalization process began for Picciolini when he was losing the people he deeply loved and how he was forced to interact with people from all walks of life. Despite the violent atmosphere in the movement, he believed he was protecting white people from social and systemic discrimination. Even some acquaintances who are part of marginalized groups were 'okay' as they 'weren't the same ones' that Picciolini believed were 'destroying our culture', just as he was recruiting newer white skinheads members (p. 88, 110). He launched a promising music career, performed with his rock band at rallies, and riled up himself with the aid of stimulants while attracting the attention he had craved since childhood (p. 112). However, as part of the disillusionment, or the *psychological* catalyst, is when Picciolini sensed something was wrong with his ideology and the *members* themselves. An example is when Clark Martell, a man Picciolini once trusted, was proven to have a mental illness through his letters from prison, making Picciolini feel sick in his stomach, through *instinct,* after Martell expressed his blessing for Picciolini's band (pg. 187). Picciolini further

deradicalizes himself by unpredictably socializing with a set of anti-racist people over music, after losing his family and financial security.

Picciolini was astounded to learn that he met anti-racist people willing to buy his punk-rock items from his record store, giving him financial support. He was utterly confused as his ideological beliefs started "crumbling," proving how the *actor* catalysts influenced him to deradicalize further (p. 231). Picciolini realizes the social influence of music, as he loved the sound of punk skinhead music, before he further internalized the lyrics, as the music represents emotions and events in his youth, similar to what other former white nationalists felt, as some former members have involuntary reactions to the music (Simi et al., 2017, 11; Picciolini, 2017, 250). Through empathy, he began to see the people with diverse backgrounds that he frequently socialized with from his store, along with his college experiences, like Sammy, the Black American skinhead punk who expresses his passion for the punk band Screwdrivers, regardless of their racist lyrics, to Picciolini (p. 230-231). Their love for various punk music roots in *the desire to destroy social hierarchy*. The racism in punk culture includes feeling disconnected from mainstream society through frustration and disillusionment. The shock values in early punk as a challenge against mainstream society led people to toy with Nazi imagery, blurring the boundaries between actual racist and non-racist, into supporting white nationalist punk music regardless of intentions (Ambrosch, 2018, 903-907). The punk subculture symbolizes a cultural outlet for people sensing alienation from social institutions, as these individuals have non-normative traits that distance them from mainstream culture. For instance, queer punk music addresses the experiences and the emotional pain of homophobia by challenging heteronormative hegemony through lyrics (Wiedlack, 2013, 4-5). Picciolini was alienated as a child of working-class Italian immigrants instead of being part of an upper-class Anglo-Saxon family, such as his embarrassment of getting McDonald's as a school lunch or students mocking his last name (Picciolini, 2017, 26, 6-8). Picciolini could sense humanity in the people, as *criminal and marginalised individuals* who crave self-healing to eliminate the sense of inferiority, which drove them collectively into appreciating punk music through its symbolic meanings (Bjørgo, 2011, 8).

As part of the environmental catalysis, Picciolini entered a melancholic era that would overshadow his ideological beliefs: the loss of his family and his failing music career.

Picciolini felt guilty when his younger brother was murdered by gang rivals through gunshots, blaming himself for not protecting his brother from his drug addiction and his affiliations with gang members, blaming himself for his rages and not spending enough time with his younger brother throughout childhood (p. 257-259). Picciolini also realized that his first wife, his high school sweetheart and the mother of their two sons, suffered as he was not emotionally available for the family anymore, just as she constantly feared that Picciolini would die or be in prison for his dangerous lifestyle as a white nationalist skinhead, resulting in her leaving him and to take primary custody of their children (p. 244). After his wife and children left, Picciolini slowly trusted the anti-racist punkers at his store, as they differed from the white nationalist punkers by their lack of violence, their compassion, and encouraging Picciolini away from the white supremacist propaganda. Eventually, Picciolini distanced himself from the movement by actively joining humanist causes, remarried his second wife, and became active in his sons' lives, ensuring they would not feel alienation as he and his younger brother did.

After the publication of *White American Youth*, Picciolini published his second book *Breaking Hate* (2020), where he interviews several former extremists to share their stories of being radicalized and deracialized out of the movement, from the Alt-Right to Islamist jihadists. He started his podcast series *F*** Your Racist History* in 2021, a scripted podcast series in which he discourses racist historical accounts overlooked by the general public, such as racist origins in children's nursery rhythms (Picciolini, n.d.).

With the ongoing debate on subcultures that uses ironic racism, we should caution against ironic racism that platforms and normalizes racism through satire, regardless of intention. We risk people who falsely understand racism through presupposed ideas, such as racist beliefs are merely illogical, without understanding the complexity of racism and whiteness. The complexity includes the emotionality of whiteness, including the formation of *white rage*. Researchers should also caution on how the memoir lacks in-depth discussions on how people Picciolini met influenced him enough to deradicalize himself. He could have shared more precise recollections that would help readers empathize with those who influenced him to leave the movement behind him, as part of learning who these individuals are like would understand more about the author himself. Picciolini could have also shared

mistakes he made while trying to deradicalize himself, as some former white supremacists expressed difficulties of *ideologically* distancing themselves from the movement through subconscious reactions (relapses and momentary flashes), such as whether he felt the urge to sing along to racist lyrics or immediate disgust towards interracial couples (Simi et al., 2017; 11-12).

Overall, Picciolini's account helps researchers reflect on how deradicalization consists of push-and-pull factors, mainly how a subculture, particularly punk subculture, can spread messages that can influence people into and out of radicalization through emotionality and identity.

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