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The New Politics of Hate? An Assessment of the Appeal of the English Defence League Amongst Disadvantaged White Working-Class Communities in England

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ABSTRACT

Since the summer of 2009 in the United Kingdom there have been a number of violent clashes amongst white and south Asian males, anti-fascist demonstrators, and the police. These disturbances have centred around the activities of a new far-right grouping, the English Defence League (EDL), which claims to oppose 'radical Islam'. This article charts the growth of the EDL and examines its motivations and ideologies. It argues that the increasing influence of this organisation reflects wider socio-economic and political processes, and in particular needs to be understood in light of the contemporary state of 'post-politics' in which the UK is embroiled. Drawing on our own empirical research, we argue that the growth in popularity of the EDL amongst some segments of England's marginalised and disenfranchised white working class must be understood in the context of the failure of mainstream political discourses to reach out to these communities, who have instead turned to the EDL as an organisation through which they can vent their anger at the 'Islamic other' rather than at the political and financial classes that are the real source of their disadvantage.

Keywords: extremism, Islamophobia, class strife, British ethnography, soccer hooliganism, anti-racism, anti-Islamism, religious intolerance, British politics

I. INTRODUCTION: THE BIRTH AND GROWTH OF THE ENGLISH DEFENCE LEAGUE

In this article we examine the spectacular recent emergence of a new form of far-right street-protest movement in England: the English Defence League (or as it is more commonly referred to, the EDL). The EDL is a collective of largely marginalised, white, working-class men who have used the EDL's marches to become involved in violent and hostile forms of

direct action against what the group terms 'Islamic extremism' (Garland & Treadwell, 2010; Bartlett & Littler, 2011). Since 2009 we have employed an extensive ethnographic methodology, and utilised both participant observation and interviewing, to study the EDL and its core support. The research has involved numerous conversations and life history interviews with EDL members, attendance at a number of EDL protests and events, and the monitoring of websites and discussion forums and other social media, in an attempt to gain an insight into the EDL and the motivations of those drawn to it (see Treadwell & Garland, 2011).

Our interest was sparked initially as a result of the EDL's involvement in disorder during the summer of 2009, when several major urban centres in the UK, including Manchester, Birmingham, Luton, Stoke, Leicester, and Bradford,¹ witnessed a number of violent disturbances involving a range of new, seemingly 'far-right' activist groups. Positioning themselves in vocal opposition to 'radical Islam' and 'Islamic extremism', these groups organised a series of protest marches in the latter half of that year that on several occasions erupted into clashes amongst the protesters, counter-demonstrators, and the police, and resulted in significant arrests for public order offences.² Incorporated amongst the marchers were several related factions, including Casuals United, the English Defence League, Welsh Defence League, Scottish Defence League, March for England, United British Alliance, British Citizens Against Islam Extremists, and Stop the Islamification of Europe (Gable *et al.*, 2009). The most prominent of these have been Casuals United and the EDL, two overlapping and interlinking groups that have emerged out of the fringes of England's domestic soccer hooligan sub-culture that has long been associated by commentators (although only occasionally accurately—see Armstrong, 1998; Stott & Pearson, 2007) with the politics of the extreme right (see Garland & Treadwell, 2010; Goodwin, 2011).

Utilising 21st century methods of social networking and protesting (organising 'flashmobs' and using mobile phone and internet technologies to communicate and facilitate physical and third-space campaigns) and functioning in a world where domestic football banning orders and prohibitive ticket pricing make the spectator experience of soccer a less attractive arena in which to seek physical confrontations, these two groups have been portrayed in the press as 21st century harbingers of far-right extremist politics (see, for example, Kerbaj, 2009; Allen, 2011). There is some doubt, however, regarding the accuracy of this assessment, for, as has been shown, there is a suggestion that such crude characterisation ignores the complex differences and continuities that this anti-Islam movement has with traditional far-right ideologies (Copsey, 2010; Jackson, 2011).

The mainstream leadership of the EDL has repeatedly highlighted

what it sees as the group's anti-racist and inclusive credentials. One of the distinctive and peculiar aspects of the EDL's politics is its emphasis upon anti-racism and its vocal opposition to the far-right British National Party (BNP) and neo-Nazi Combat 18. Apparently in an effort both to distance itself from the BNP and other far-right groupings, and to create a united 'front' with those from minority ethnic groupings that may oppose aspects of Islam, the EDL has displayed 'Black and White Unite' banners at many of its demonstrations and stressed its opposition to racism, fascism, and Nazism. The EDL has also championed women's and gay rights in an attempt to prove its democratic, non-extremist credentials while at the same time trying to show that Islam is an anti-modern, anti-progressive religion that is opposed to homosexuality and women's equality. Some of its supporters also apparently have a pro-Israeli stance, evidenced by the appearance of Star of David flags at some of their marches (witnessed by the authors at a number of demonstrations during fieldwork from 2009 to 2012). These viewpoints are at odds with many of those normally associated with far-right parties that have long championed the 'traditional' ideas of the family and of the role of women within it, whilst being vocal in their opposition to homosexuality. Anti-semitism has, of course, been a feature of many of these extremist groupings since the 1930s (Copsey, 2008).

However, accounts have also shown how this 'legitimate' front is often at odds with the crass and overt racism of its rank and file membership who have been open about their use of targeted violence against Muslims and ethnic minorities with the authors (Treadwell & Garland, 2011; Treadwell, 2012). EDL supporters have been reported as attacking an anti-fascist music concert in Yorkshire, being jailed for physically attacking staff at office buildings that had hosted anti-EDL meetings, and having attacked a book-stall in Sandwell near Birmingham (Bellamy, 2011; Halesowen News, 2011). Perhaps most concerning were the actions of EDL activist and former soldier Simon Beech, who in late 2011 was one of two men jailed for 10 years for an attempted arson attack on a mosque in Stoke that involved trying to cause an explosion by sabotaging gas supply lines. When sentencing the convicted men, Judge Mark Eades stated: 'It seems to me your purpose was not to get at extremists, but to get at Muslims in general and your purpose can only have been to destabilise community relationships' (British Broadcasting Corporation, 2011a).

It is therefore difficult to take the supposed 'tolerant' facets of the EDL's thinking at face value. It could well be the case that many of these more moderate aspects of their ideological framework are simply adopted in order to be seen to be in opposition to the tenets of what they believe constitute 'extremist Islam'. This may well explain the adoption of Star of David flags, which may in reality be deployed by EDL marchers in order to

provoke a reaction from Muslim observers who object to Israeli policies in the Middle East. Similarly, the championing of the rights of women and of gay and lesbian people could merely be an attempt to persuade the public (and media) that the EDL is, in fact, a mainstream movement in the face of an intolerant religion (Islam) that grants little freedom to women or those of minority sexualities. The EDL may well be hoping that by embracing 'liberal' causes they will be cast by the media in a moderate light and, in turn, Islam will be cast in a bad, extremist light.

However, the true nature of the EDL's politics may have inadvertently been given away by the organisation's self-appointed leader, Stephen Yaxley-Lennon (who uses the pseudonym 'Tommy Robinson') in his speech at an EDL demonstration in the English midlands city of Leicester, and recorded in field notes in October 2010:

We're not Nazis, we're not fascists—we will smash Nazis the same way we will smash militant Islam. We are exactly about black and white unite, every single community in this country can come and join our ranks, fill our ranks. We don't care if you arrived here yesterday; you're welcome to protect our Christian culture and our way of life. (S. Yaxley-Lennon, personal communication, October 9, 2010)

However, evident in this discourse is Yaxley-Lennon's reference to 'our Christian culture' and 'our way of life', which reveals his narrow view of an English society and Englishness that is exclusive of those of different cultures and religious backgrounds. Indeed, in the same speech he went on to say: 'We will combat militant Islam wherever it raises its ugly, paedophilic, disturbed, medieval fucking head', in an act that must come precariously close to inciting religious hatred, as defined by the U.K.'s Racial and Religious Hatred Act 2006. Certainly, if the leader of the EDL is stressing conformity to 'our culture' on the one hand, and condemning aspects of Islam in such brutal terms on the other, then he is undermining the organisation's own claims to moderation and tolerance of difference.

In this article we trace the development of what we call Britain's post-political 'stupor', in which ideology has largely become absent from mainstream political policies and debates. We suggest that this has created a vacuum within politics, and especially of the left of the spectrum, which has prompted, at least in part, the growth of the EDL. The absence of an authentic working-class political discourse and wider political processes in the UK has left disadvantaged and marginalised white working-class communities that traditionally supported the Labour Party, with no natural political 'home'. The relative poverty of many of these communities, coupled with the presence of resentment and anger at what is seen as the comparatively prosperous position of 'undeserving' Muslim populations, has seen ele-

ments within them view the English Defence League as the only legitimate output for their anger and disillusion. Unless these issues are recognised, there is a real prospect of the continued growth of the EDL.

II. BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT TO THE RISE OF THE EDL: BRITAIN'S POST-POLITICAL STUPOR

That the EDL have come to the fore at this particular moment is doubtlessly significant, and while it would be inaccurate to suggest that the emergence of the organisation is symptomatic only of a crisis in mainstream politics, or that this is a sole, or even the most salient feature in explaining the materialization of the group, that is the issue to which we will focus our attentions here. However, we would suggest that any understanding of the growth in popularity and influence of the EDL must be connected to the backdrop of widening inequality that reflects, for the first time perhaps in nearly two decades, the very real fall in living standards that has affected many of those in the lower economic orders in the UK.

The political and economic conditions that have enabled the EDL to flourish are not likely to disappear quickly, and it seems likely that even more acute feelings of marginalisation will become the reality of many people's lived experience for the foreseeable future (Dorling, 2010). After extremist Anders Behring Breivik's murderous spree in Norway in the summer of 2011 there was a recognition of the dangers of the far-right amongst the European political elite, with many of its leaders overtly condemning his actions. Yet since that time there has been little or no condemnation of some of the politics and ideas that underpinned his actions. The paranoid and Islamophobic rantings found in Breivik's thousand-page "manifesto" were not created in a vacuum, but rather were indicative of how across Europe we have seen the growth of political intolerance and the 'othering' of 'alien' communities, threats of tightened border controls and clampdown and deportation of illegal immigrants, and an increasing acceptance in both media (Gilroy, 2004) and political circles that multiculturalism has 'failed' (British Broadcasting Corporation, 2010; 2011b). That has gelled with a commonly shared axis of media-fuelled Islamophobia that has spread across the European Union. Many of Europe's political leaders, including the UK's David Cameron, Germany's Angela Merkel, and France's Nicolas Sarkozy, have been denouncing multiculturalism in sometimes the crudest of terms, in part due to a growing fear of seeing their political position lose ground to fringe far-right parties. They show no signs that they are going to back off or adopt a more tolerant position, and arguably, for example, in Britain this 'pin-striped xenophobia' is now part of the political centre

ground, which, though generally intolerant of 'racism', has little challenged Islamophobia.

The EDL cleverly plays upon the present 'risky' status assigned to British (and particularly Muslim) Asians³ in the popular press over the course of the last decade in a way that appears to have resonance with marginalized white working classes. Much of the dominant discourse surrounding Islam has therefore centred on issues of its supposed anti-British, anti-modern, anti-liberal, and dangerous nature (Fekete, 2009; Williamson & Khiabany, 2010). Moreover, the twin elements identified by Law (2010) that are often conflated within the umbrella term 'Islamophobia'—anti-Islam sentiment and hostility directed at Muslim people—have been adeptly exploited by the EDL. In particular, the leadership of the EDL has been clever in the way that it has tapped into the frustrations of a disenfranchised section of the white working class whose grievances arise from a dense tapestry of social, economic, and cultural conditions and neglects, including being sidelined almost totally from mainstream politics. So while the EDL have not grown solely due to a process of political marginalization and non-representation of the white working class, both aspects have provided key impetus to the organisation's momentum.

To contextualise this, and by way of developing further the political backdrop and context that explains the emergence of this group, we intend to argue that the United Kingdom is embroiled in what could be termed a *post-political* period, a term we feel accurately demarcates the apathy, disinterest, and scepticism with which many of the populace, and particularly many of the marginalised segments of the white working class regard domestic, parliamentary democratic politics.

We use this term to demarcate a range of processes (arguably the public loss of faith in mainstream politics is complex and multifaceted), but also to capture the spirit of a time where there exists a messy cohesive centrality where political ideology is concerned. What we are suggesting is that the traditional ideological divisions that demarked British politics between the political left and right have, with the collapse of communist east and the 'triumph of neo liberal orthodoxy' (Fukuyama, 1993), largely been eroded, leaving only a centrist, cynical middle representation that seeks predominantly to encourage more affluent members of the working and middle class to vote while cutting loose a large swathe of the electorate (Shaw, 2008).

Perhaps a key event in ushering this new era in is the adoption by the British Labour Party of its moderate and centrist 'third way' that is best read as an attempt to resolve the problems of the traditional Labour Party, and most especially its failure to cultivate electoral success during the decade of the 1980s. From 1979 to 1997 when it won a landslide election vic-

tory, the Labour Party had been in opposition, struggling to present a challenge to Conservative and right-wing politics. Indeed, electoral success resulted only from Tony Blair's campaign to rebrand and remake the Labour Party after his election to position of party leader in 1994 (Rawnsley, 2001). Under Blair's headship the party adopted the term 'New Labour' as a conscious exercise in moving away from its traditional left-wing position towards a political centre ground, in accordance with the arguments of Blair's favourite sociologist, Anthony Giddens, a leading advocate of the spread of 'Third Way'⁴ thinking (Giddens, 1998; see also Shaw, 2008; Rawnsley, 2001).

Arguably, that shift in Labour political ideology serves as a defining moment in ushering in the contemporary post-political moment that could be regarded as characteristic of the political terrain in many advanced capitalist social democracies (Fukuyama, 1993), but it also follows the growth of neo-liberalism in the UK. After all, in the UK it has become something of a trend for politicians to deny any specific ideological affiliation and instead to encourage the electorate to regard them simply as pragmatic administrators and trustworthy representatives; indeed this became a core part of Labour's political strategy for a decade (Lees-Marshment, 2001; Rawnsley, 2001). There is now an almost universal belief in this new political class that the electorate's best interests are met via the promotion of the free market (Žižek, 2007; Harvey, 2006; Shaw, 2008). In this respect there is nothing to divide mainstream British parties in terms of actual policy, as all seemingly accept without reservation the value of neoliberal economic policy (Harvey, 2006, 2011). Elsewhere, these politicians often seem quite relaxed about talking of how comfortable they are with a capitalist system which many would argue has reached its capacity (Žižek, 2007). Indeed history all too starkly shows us the character of Labour's economic and social policies for the period they held power in Britain, and an apparent behavioural culture of greed and corruption was exposed amongst British elected representatives and the corporate elite between 2008 and 2011. Firstly there was the parliamentary expenses scandal amongst Members of Parliament, and then in its wake the vast bonuses given to financial traders and bankers despite the widespread perception that their irresponsible lending had triggered the global economic downturn. Here the elites, who seemed immune from the law, were caught with their hands in the till (Žižek, 2007, 2011; Harvey, 2006, 2011). Yet for a sceptical electorate, there is no alternative on offer, no serious traditional left-wing proposal to tax the rich more or to regulate the market in anything more than a tokenistic way (Harvey, 2011).

It is now widely accepted that a political party which owes its very origin to trades unionism, collective solidarity, and representation of the

average man and woman of the working class actually presided over a free market-driven boom that did little for those at the lower rungs of the social ladder. Now examined with the advantage of hindsight, 'New' Labour's record looks decidedly shaky, and it is now generally acknowledged that their time in office witnessed a growth in income inequality and worsening social equality, while benefitting the wealthy and elite sections of the populace at the cost of those in other sections of the social strata (Dorling, 2010).

Now in the UK, Prime Minister David Cameron has led a revanchist Conservative government (albeit perhaps tempered from its worst excesses by the fact it is tied to a coalition with centrist Liberal Democrats) slanted towards ever greater public sector retrenchment, austerity, and welfare cuts, again arguably shifting the burden of the 'double-dip' recession ever more squarely onto the backs of those who had little hand in the financial crisis, yet are subject to the kinds of austerity measures that really hurt the poorest strata of society the most (Harvey, 2011; Dorling, 2010).

Instead, many British people believe their politicians to be corrupt, just as they believe the system to be tilted toward the interests of elites.⁵ For some, the very act of even participating in parliamentary elections has simply become pointless and, as our research has uncovered and is discussed below, this disillusion with the mainstream parties and the parliamentary process has caused many from the white working class to turn to an organisation they think is listening to their needs: the English Defence League. Indeed, there is evidence that a similar situation is increasingly the norm in Europe, where the seeds of dissatisfaction are already feeding burgeoning far-right political discourses. Of course, in the UK the relatively small-scale resurgence of far-right parties like the British National Party does not represent mass sentiment, and thankfully, it is likely that these types of parties will remain just as politically unsuccessful in Britain as they have ever been. There has never really been much appetite for flirting with the far-right amongst the majority of the British working class (Gilroy, 2004), and indeed, if anything the opposite is true, and ever since the battle of Cable Street in 1936,⁶ when British fascists were driven from the streets of East London by local communities, endorsements of political far-right extremism in the UK has remained sidelined and peripheral to the mainstream body politics (Standing, 2011). While there is, of course, an ugly racist undercurrent in English culture that can be stirred up and result in harmful individual and collective acts of violence on occasion (as the EDL well demonstrate), it has failed to prompt a political and electoral swing to the far-right anywhere near large enough for them to gain even a slim national political foothold, although such parties have enjoyed relative success at local and European levels (Goodwin, 2011).

However, that is not to suggest that the emergence of the English

Defence League should be neglected, as the discourse endorsed by the group may well influence the forms of everyday hate violence that are perpetuated routinely in areas of intense economic competition. In the void left within traditional politics, groups such as the EDL emerge to target not the ideological system that causes the marginalisation of the working class, but instead the other and different communities that often live cheek by jowl alongside the disadvantaged white working class, entrapped by similar poverty and exclusionary processes.

III. FROM THE MACRO POLITICS TO THE MICRO HATE VIOLENCE: VIEWS FROM THE FRONTLINE OF THE EDL

We might want to consider why it is that now, in the contemporary post-political moment, there is a palpable sense of an increasingly explicit tone of cultural, religious, and racial hostility between white communities and Islamic communities that similarly are often economically marginalized. One such answer might be that it has been ever thus, and the experience of prejudice and hostility for minority communities is long enshrined in the English way of life (Hiro, 1992). However, we would suggest that such a view is naïve, and indeed, alternative commentaries have recognized the industrialized working class as the prime source of the country's often neglected and unvalued, unruly, yet vibrant multiculturalism that has evolved organically and unnoticed, but often successfully in its urban centres (Gilroy, 2004). For that reason we might tentatively suggest that the new flourishing culture of 'them and us' that replaces these successes might be best understood as an extension of the extreme objectless anxiety and cynicism that has afflicted the unemployed and those in precarious forms of unemployment from the 1980s onwards, exacerbated by the advent of more individualistic forms of neo-liberal centrist politics.

Indeed, we surmise that a significant perception within some disadvantaged, former white working-class communities is that the main political parties have prioritized service provision towards minority ethnic residents, migrants, and asylum seekers (and the individual accounts of EDL members certainly seem to be predicated upon such concerns), and that this sense is the very product of life in a socio-economic milieu in which increasingly atomised and depoliticised individuals and socio-cultural groups are turned against each other in an unforgiving competition. While our research evidence is by no means conclusive, we wish to draw on it here as a means of illustrating how within a climate of the perception of a lack of political representation, individualistic competition provides a useful conceptual framework for examining the role and function of the EDL.

For more than three years our ethnographic fieldwork has taken us to

EDL meetings and demonstrations and into pubs, snooker halls, nightclubs, and boxing tournaments with members of the EDL. Space prohibits a full descriptive account of the methods employed, and that task is better tackled in more detail elsewhere; suffice to say here we have conducted numerous interviews with EDL supporters. Since the advent of Chicagoan Sociology, the ethnographic method, taken from anthropology into sociology and criminology, has provided academics with what Clifford Geertz (1973) called the 'thick description', without which we cannot even begin to analyse cultural meanings and motivations. Here we see the nuances of desire, meaning, and human relations in operation in their everyday contexts. It is just such material generated with EDL members that we now seek to draw on to make our case on the erosion of traditional politics as being a useful framing device for understanding the EDL.

Kenny (all names are pseudonyms) doesn't hate his British-born black equivalents, and describes himself as a non-racist, and he has black friends and knows black lads from school and even recalls the class solidarity between them, but admits that he doesn't count a single Asian (or in his parlance 'Paki') amongst his social circle. He has been attending EDL gatherings in a piecemeal fashion since the demonstration in the north midlands city of Stoke in 2010 with several of his mates. Kenny is avowedly working class by his own self-admission, periodically employed laboring in the building trade, doing bits and pieces of gardening and as something of an occasional self-starting entrepreneur, buying and selling, 'wheeling and dealing'. He is well enough off to comfortably pay the rent and enjoy the occasional foreign holiday with his partner, but a few weeks without wages every now and again are a fact of life, and he continually claims welfare benefits whether he is working or not. Indeed, for Kenny, a prime reason for turning to the EDL is the perception that this welfare system that he depends on is swamped by 'incomers', be it 'asylum seekers', 'illegal immigrants', 'African bloody Somalis' or more commonly 'Pakis'. For Kenny, the key issue is not 'race' but religion, in that it is 'Muslims' who 'talk no English . . . [who are prioritized] ahead of British people, black and white, in the queue for benefits and social housing'.

For Kenny, and reflecting the disillusion with the Labour Party among the disadvantaged white working class discussed above, the EDL are correct, and a sinister project to Islamise Britain is about to succeed:

It all started with the fucking politicians mate, I would shoot them with all the scum Muslims. The Conservatives never gave a fuck cos they know they don't have to live with dirty Muslims in their big London houses, but Labour, they are worse than them. I remember Labour sticking up for blacks, and that was fair enough because they [black people] came here and got on with it, they didn't rock the boat . . . but Labour

didn't give a fuck when the Muslims came in and started taking the piss, they did nothing. They should have capped immigration, they should have protected the working class, but those cunts, they opened the flood-gates. I don't like the BNP, I am not racist but immigration now, it's Muslim immigration, Somalia, Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, that is where they are coming from.

Clearly Kenny's quotes reflect the dominant dissatisfaction of many rank-and-file EDL members with 'New' Labour's immigration policies. It also seems that 'British Muslim' or 'English Muslim' is clearly regarded as an unacceptable identity by many of the EDL's supporters, an assertion that is given further evidence by the types of discussions with white male EDL members witnessed by one of the authors when conducting covert ethnography on EDL demonstrations. However, in keeping with that there is a sense of acute frustration at the perceived abandonment of lower-status white groups by political elites, as Kenny states:

The EDL basically, well they are willing to tell these Muslims we have had enough of them, it's that basically, if they can't live with us then get out, go back to wherever, you know.

Interviewer: So what is it that gets you about Muslims?

Kenny: Where I live, they are the ones with the nice cars, the big houses, their kids running round like jack the lads in Mercs and beemers [BMW cars] that have been bought by ripping us off in their shops for a pint of milk while they look after their own.

In his study, Jackson described the EDL as part of the 'new far-right' of European politics (Jackson, 2011) and suggested that, while they are genuinely anti-Nazi, they remain in conflict with liberal democratic principles. Rather than promoting the 'expulsion' of minority ethnic populations favoured by the 'old far-right' however, the 'new far-right' such as the EDL seeks to promote assimilation to some notional 'English culture'. In many ways our research confirms such a contention, as typical expressions from EDL members demonstrate, but so too some reveal older, simplistic racism:

I am not a racist, but the country is broke, and I cannot see why I should pay for fucking interpreters for lazy Muslims who can't be bothered to learn English but are happy to take our benefits. I can't see why when I have paid taxes all my life some newly arrived Muslim should get the same treatment as me on the NHS. I cannot see why we should pay benefits for "Abu al fucking hatespeaker" . . . whatever his name is, so he can raise his ten kids and slag off my country. That isn't racist, that's realist,

and now, why is no fucking politicians saying that? I will tell you why, it's cos they couldn't give a fuck so long as they are all right.

They [Muslims] can't live like us cos they are not evolved for it, they are simple, made for backward villages in the mountain where they can sit around eating stinking curries and raping chickens. They come over here and ruin England, I mean, would you want to live next to them? I don't, but they are taking over. That is why I want them gone. (Leicester EDL demonstration, 2010)

Interestingly however, rather than showing a frustration with politics or politicians, many EDL members we interacted with claimed little real interest in politics; more common was a cynicism towards politics and a political detachment. They also little regarded the marginalisation that they experienced as predicated by a wider socio-structural system, and saw the 'everyday' experiences of their lives without recourse to wider socio-economic political drivers. Indeed this has been suggested overtly by those EDL members we have spoken to:

Steve: I have to rely on benefits yes, and when they fucked mine up the other day and I have to go down and see them, what do I get, some Paki looking down their nose at me. I am entitled to get benefits in this country, it's my fucking country. You see them, the Paki staff, they are all right with other Pakis, but a white man like me, they fucking treat me disrespectfully, in my country! Now I cannot understand why a Paki can get benefits in England, if they do not work here how are they entitled, and you see them pulling up in their Lexuses and Mercs [Mercedes, both luxury cars] at the dole office. Try telling me this country isn't fucked.

Chris: I am a maintenance worker, right; I work hard, put in effort. But when you work for our lot, you do contract work for the council. You see what the Pakis get, and it properly fucks you off mate, 10 of them in a big house, one of them working as a taxi driver, the rest on benefits. I see their places, and they always have better tellies than what I have. Three or four cars on the drive, and I see that and I think, "I was born here, and I work, and I am paying for these smelly lazy cunts, when they can't even speak English?" I hear these politically correct cunts tell me it is good for England, well I see it every day, and I can't see how it is. All I see is my Gran lives in a shit flat while some of these cunts are given every luxury, only to treat them like trash anyway. These Pakis lads, right, they like our benefits, but not our laws.

Like Steve and Chris, poor white men struggling to get by and residing in large, inner-city milieus, much of the EDL's support appears to stem from communities that are situated where a large Asian and Islamic population is found (e.g. the likes of Birmingham and Luton). It is often in these areas that poor, socially excluded white communities live in close proximity

to large Asian populations, where there can often be very little interaction between these groups and where mutual suspicion and hostility can develop (McGhee, 2008). It is within such areas, where pre-existing tensions are stoked by agitation and aggression from the EDL, that its members' hate violence is all too real, as two stated:

It's just the way they are, taking the piss. It's the double standards we have in this country towards them, how they get everything given to them that they want. The lads are all arrogant little pricks that reckon they are hard, they are nothing. Honestly mate, I love hitting Paki youths, I love it when you get Paki lads that think they are hard. I will feel better today when I have hit a Paki lad. (from an interview with EDL member Tim)

Yes, ok, some people might not like it, but at the end of the day if a Paki lad is out when the EDL land and doesn't fuck off pretty quickly, he is going to get slapped isn't he. So he was on his own, big deal, I was the only one who hit him, as far as I am concerned, that is fair. (Ricky, EDL member, to others after assaulting an Asian youth)

It has been argued that many of these 'politically pointless detonations of violence that occur among the young men who wander the streets, pubs and clubs of the de-industrialized zones are often triggered by the frustrations experienced in struggles over inadequate material resources' (Hall, 2002, p. 53). Rather than blaming an inherently unfair system, or the processes that marginalized them, some of those we spoke to justified violent enactments of hate on the streets as a reaction to the decline of tenured jobs and the corrosion of legitimate opportunity. It was the 'other', demonised as a threat to jobs, housing, and the future of the area, that becomes the target for such violence (see, *inter alia*, Sibbit, 1997; Iganski, 2008; McDevitt, Levin, Nolan, & Bennett, 2010).

Despite the fact that the greed and corruption of political elites were exposed so spectacularly by the *Daily Telegraph* newspaper in 2009 in stories relating to the fiddling of parliamentary expenses by elected representatives, or brought into view in the return of vast bonuses to bankers and financial traders after their irresponsible lending had triggered the credit crunch more recently, these were not sources of anxiety for our subjects. Instead, those we studied associated the illegitimate practices of 'Muslims' with whom they often lived in close proximity (even if their lives were almost wholly segregated) with their day-to-day struggles (see Allen, 2011). In contrast, the global wealthy and advantaged who comprise neo-liberalism's plutocratic elite remained largely immune from such associations. Despite the fact that the corruption and the macro-political manoeuvres made in the service of the tycoon capitalists' project of economic and cul-

tural restructuring have become ever more transparent, spectacular, and crude in the last decade, and their role in the impoverishment and disenfranchisement of so many young people more obvious, these factors were largely missed by those EDL supporters with whom we have interacted, as our field notes show:

Author: I know David as a Midland-based banned soccer hooligan who admits he hates what he calls 'Pakis'. He is on the theme when I meet him, telling others about a fight on a train station platform over a football. In all it was meaningless, but he didn't hurt the lad he assaulted too badly, because 'well, he wasn't a Muslim'. This is almost delivered as a punch line to his joke. However, towards the end of the evening I have a drink with him and he begins to tell me something of why he likes the EDL:

David: I left school with no qualifications and that, 15, nothing right, now I see all these Muslim kids, all these Pakis and they think they can rub my face in things, they can treat me like a cunt, look down on me. They all wear Armani, they all have nice cars, they all have money, but they don't want England to be English anymore, because they want to be in power, they want to take over the world, they fucking do. They have come in and sneakily, now, they are taking over. You look at who is buying the big houses, it's Muslims, you look at who owns the businesses, it's Muslims. The blacks hate them too, because when they get into an area, they take it over. They are buying churches and building mosques on them. What hope is there for white English lads like me now, none, the Muslims are taking it all away . . .

(From field notes) Author: Marcus is ranting now, as people laugh around him, and although I find it uncomfortable, I feel I have to laugh too . . .

Marcus: The fucking Muslims are scum, paedophiles, rape young white girls, sell heroin to white and black kids, rip off your mum in their shops, and they will blow you up too given half a chance. I say we do a flash mob, all get off the bus, go down and bash a few taxi drivers, smash a kebab shop, it will be great, go out and do some vigilante justice against those thieving, lying stealing Muzzie cunts.

Dale interjects: Marcus, don't fucking talk about kebabs mate, I am starving.

Marcus responds to a chorus of laughs: If you are taking the Muzzies' side, I will have to drop you [slang for 'knock you out'] . . . it's dog-eat-dog out there mate, and the Muslim fuckers use dogs in their kebab shops.

IV. CONCLUSIONS: UNDERSTANDING THE EDL'S POTENTIAL

We have argued that the existence of the new far-right is in part a consequence of a contemporary mainstream political climate in the UK that is devoid of an alternative or cohesive left-of-centre political doctrine that could appeal to those from the disadvantaged white working class. We have suggested that, while the liberal left in British politics had always seen themselves as the champions of progress, the defenders of the poor and marginalised, in fact the new political 'left', epitomised by the advent of 'New Labour' and its endorsement of the 'Third Way', endorse the same free market policies as the right, and are happy to appropriate much of the rhetoric of the right when it comes to the solutions to the global economic downturn. Indeed in many ways there is no better illustration of the situation than the social chasm that has opened up between the old, working-class, union-based left, and affluent cosmopolitan liberals in the public sector and cultural industries who are loath to criticise the damage wrought by promotion of the interests of a few over the many. The latter group is now undoubtedly the more politically erudite and powerful (Shaw, 2008).

While it might seem an anathema to suggest that the EDL are in some sense representative of the absence of politics, they neatly articulate, albeit in often a less than articulate manner, the palpable sense of frustration at the way they perceive their communities have been fundamentally altered by immigration in a way that has been detrimental to them. Our research shows that in the absence of an alternative ideology or political mechanism for re-organising socioeconomic relations and subjects in a way that economic or social equality can become an ethical goal or a practical possibility, the venality, exploitation, and corruption practiced every day by those who inhabit the top strata will continue unopposed. With current centrist and neoliberal 'doctrines' seen as irrelevant by many of those 'lost' and disenfranchised at the lower-reaches of the socio-economic ladder, there exists instead a growing anger with, and resentment of, those similarly located near them at the bottom of the social ladder—Muslim communities.

Worryingly, though, recent opinion polls conducted in the UK reveal that many of the EDL's ideas and values may be more mainstream and widely held than is often acknowledged. For example, Ford (2011, p. 149) cited surveys that indicate that a majority of the public believes that minority groups should assimilate into existing British cultures rather than maintaining their own customs and cultures, and that assimilation is preferable to multiculturalism. Authoritarian responses to threats of terrorism are also endorsed in these surveys, prompting Ford to suggest that:

The authoritarianism of the extreme right, while "extreme" in the sense

that it is threatening to the values of modern British democracy, is not “extreme” in the sense of being the position of a small minority of voters. Instead, such ideas could easily pass into law if put to the public via direct referenda.’ (p. 150)

Therefore the EDL’s presentation of itself as an organisation of ‘moderation’ that champions the issues and values that are important to ordinary people, may have more resonance than some would like to think. If many of its key campaigning ideas are not seen as being extreme by large swathes of the British public, then this may explain why it has had made such rapid progress since its inception in 2009, and why it could continue to grow. For the moment, though, its focus seems to be on its core target audience: the socially marginalized, angry and poor segments of the working class that have little representation. Whether there will be a counter to the current political impasse remains to be seen, but if there is not, our fear is that the contemporary economic downturn will push working-class voters further in the direction that some have recently taken, from the ballot box and onto the streets.

NOTES

1. Cities that often have large Islamic and minority ethnic communities living in close proximity to white working-class communities, and in several cases, have been the site of previous race-related urban disturbances.

2. The EDL has had less presence internationally, but some members did travel to the USA in 2010 on the anniversary of the 9/11 attacks to protest against the building of an Islamic cultural centre and mosque near to the Ground Zero site. On that occasion the EDL’s leader, Stephen Yaxley-Lennon, was refused entry at JFK airport, taken into custody, and flown straight back to the UK, but other members of the group were present at the protests. There is also some evidence that the group have previously sought connections with some of the more outspoken members of the US Tea Party movement.

3. ‘Asian’ in the British context refers to those whose heritage is from south Asia: commonly Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, or Sri Lanka.

4. The term the *Third Way* refers to various political positions that try to reconcile right-wing and left-wing politics by advocating a varying synthesis of right-wing economic and left-wing social policies, created as a means of capturing political centre ground. The Third Way began as a re-evaluation of political policies in the Labour Party in response to the ramifications of the collapse of a wider belief in the economic viability of

the state economic interventionist policies, and the corresponding rise of support for neo-liberal and the New Right free market philosophies.

5. The 2010 'British Social Attitudes Survey' (NatCen, 2010) demonstrated that four in 10 people stated that they 'almost never' trust governments to put the national interest first, six points above the previous all-time high of 34%, and around four times as high as the readings obtained in the late 1980s. Only a third of all people (31%) say they have 'a great deal' or 'quite a lot' of interest in politics, suggesting that disinterest and apathy is a more standard condition.

6. The Battle of Cable Street took place on Sunday 4 October 1936 in the East End of London. It was a clash between the Metropolitan Police, overseeing a march by the British Union of Fascists, led by Oswald Mosley, and anti-fascists, including local Jewish, socialist, anarchist, Irish, and communist groups, and working-class people more broadly who rejected the fascist politics of Mosley. Mosley planned to send thousands of marchers dressed in uniforms styled on those of Blackshirts through the East End, which then had a large Jewish population, but even with police support could not break through the amassed ranks of counter demonstrators and was told he must leave the area by the police. It stands as the definitive defeat of fascist political ideology in Britain.

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