

Introduction

Transgressing the *cordon sanitaire*: understanding the English Defence League as a social movement

This book is political – but not by design. It is rendered so by its object of study (the English Defence League) and its context – the rise of a new ‘far right’¹ and ‘populist radical right’ across Europe and, more recently, America. It argues that establishing an academic ‘*cordon sanitaire*’ (Mouffe, 2005: 72), in the form of typological and classificatory approaches that focus solely on the ideological dimensions of such movements and confine them to the ghetto of studies of the ‘far right’, is neither an adequate nor an effective answer to the questions raised by their emergence. It recognises that to do otherwise – to treat such movements as articulating not only the ignorant prejudice of the marginalised but their experience and perceptions of justice and injustice, equality and inequality – has political implications also. Those implications, it is argued, however, are not the condoning or legitimisation of racist or Islamophobic attitudes. Transgressing the *cordon sanitaire* signals, rather, a commitment to the reclamation of ‘politics’; the relinquishment of its quest for universal rational consensus through attempts to design institutions capable of reconciling all conflicting interests and values (Mouffe, 2005: 3) and its reconfiguration as a space for the legitimate expression of such conflict. This comes with real costs; uncomfortable views, and those who express them, have to be treated seriously, academically and politically, rather than dismissed, caricatured or ridiculed (Back, 2002: 39; Kenny, 2012: 32). Some will consider that too high a price to pay.

This introductory chapter sets out an approach to understanding activism in the English Defence League (EDL) from within social movement studies. It places the EDL alongside populist radical right rather than classic ‘far right’ movements on the political spectrum and outlines a provisional rationale for characterising it as an anti-Islamist movement. Prefacing the theoretical discussion in subsequent chapters of the book, it contextualises claims by the EDL that the organisation is ‘not racist’ but ‘against militant Islam’ within contemporary theories of ‘race’ and racism and in relation to empirical evidence of rising ‘Islamophobia’ among the wider UK population. The chapter describes the ethnographic approach adopted in the book, which is distinguished by a focus not on organisational structure and ideology but individual activists. The analytic emphasis on the meanings individuals attach to activism, it is argued, not only brings insight into how politics

and passion are intertwined in the movement but, in so doing, may open avenues for challenging prejudices and stereotypes that constrain and distort political dialogue.

Far right? Placing the EDL on the spectrum

Britain, until recently, has felt itself to be comfortably immune from new right politics. Electoral support for radical right parties in national parliamentary elections has remained lower than in other western European states. No extreme right party has succeeded in having a representative elected to national parliament and, between 1923 and 2001, extreme right parties took only five seats even at local government level (Goodwin, 2011a: 5). Electoral results from 1980–2012 show that support for such parties² in the UK did not rise above 1 per cent until 2010–12; even then, at 1.8 per cent, support remained well below that in neighbouring countries such as France (13.6 per cent) and The Netherlands (12.7 per cent) (Minkenberg, 2013: 20). The reasons for this are explored in more nuanced ways by others (see Goodwin, 2011a) but might be summarised as resulting from a combination of: the first-past-the-post electoral system, which significantly reduces the incentive to vote for candidates with little chance of securing victory in a given constituency; and the failure of the British National Party³ (BNP) to move in the direction of a ‘renewed’ radical right of the kind that has emerged elsewhere in Europe (Minkenberg, 2013: 17), continuing instead to mobilise racist and racial supremacist discourse thinly disguised in the notion of indigeneity (Williams and Law, 2012).

This immunity is far from absolute. The European Value Survey (1999–2000 and 2008–09 rounds) found base levels of xenophobia⁴ in the UK to hover around 20 per cent; this is typical of western European countries although lower than most eastern European countries (Minkenberg, 2015: 40). On the single measure of anti-immigrant prejudice (1999–2000),⁵ the level in the UK is actually higher (15.9 per cent) than the mean for western European countries (10.7 per cent) (Strabac and Listhaug, 2008: 277). Given that evidence suggests hostility to immigration is the most powerful predictor of support for populist extremist parties (Goodwin, 2011b: 9), it would appear that the same potential base of support for the populist radical right exists in the UK as elsewhere in Europe. Moreover, while proportional representation may be off the political agenda in the UK following the defeat of the referendum on electoral reform (May 2011), the political space is changing nonetheless as populist radical right and Eurosceptic parties, somewhat paradoxically, realise the potential for their voices to be heard in the European parliament. The BNP gained two seats in 2009 while the 2014 European parliamentary elections were won in the UK by the populist anti-EU United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), which took 27 per cent of the national vote.

To date research on the far right and populist radical right has been undertaken largely from a political science perspective drawing on statistical data on voter preference and behaviour, or the analysis of official programmes and statements, to understand the ideology underpinning such parties, their capacity and

strategies for mobilisation and their electoral viability and prospects. Its outcome often has been the typologisation of parties and movements based on their connections with fascism and National Socialism, current constituencies of support and ideology/policy. Characterising trends across Europe, Wodak (2013: 26) suggests the radical right scene in the UK mobilises support by emphasising the danger posed to national identity from ethnic minorities (rather than appealing to a perceived threat from Islam or a national fascist heritage). However, assessing the appeal of radical right parties on the basis of election results alone can be misleading, especially in the case of the UK, which, like Germany and Sweden, has weak radical right-wing parties but a strong movement sector (Minkenberg, 2013: 9, 22). Moreover, no national political scene is monopolised by a single 'type' of party and many parties demonstrate elements of different types. Thus, the BNP has employed anti-Islam as well as anti-multiculturalist messages in its campaigns while the EDL is a single-issue anti-Islam movement close, ideologically, to parties such as Geert Wilders's Partij voor de Vrijheid.

Thus a focus on electoral parties or on classic ideological strands associated with the far right may fail to identify, or explain the appeal of, emergent movements and more diffuse or complex coalitions of ideological strands of thought. This, it is suggested here, is because such approaches fail to give due attention to either the politics or the passion at the grass roots of such movements. This leads, first, to a limited understanding of the complex intertwining of rational and emotional dimensions of activism. Second, dismissing individuals participating in such movements as blinded by 'fascist' or 'racist' ideology and thereby excluding them from what constitutes the political (through the erection of a *cordon sanitaire*), reduces the emotion and politics of resentment (Ware, 2008) to crude authoritarian populist mobilisation enacted upon a passive (white, working-class) population. Through the focus of this study on individuals active in a movement widely perceived to be 'racist' and/or 'Islamophobic', this book, in contrast, does not elide the agency and choices made by EDL activists whilst, at the same time, seeking to understand them in their full complexity.

What is the English Defence League? The politics of nomenclature

There is conditional consensus in academic literature to date that the EDL is 'not an archetypal far-right party or movement' (Copsey, 2010: 25). For Copsey this is because the EDL 'is not driven by a fascist or neo-fascist ideological end goal', while for Allen (2011: 294), the movement's successful inclusion of 'some Jews, gays and others normally excluded by the far right' is the distinguishing factor. What it 'is', however, remains an object of academic, and political, dispute. Jackson (2011a: 7) recognises that the EDL's self-representation as not traditionally far right, not anti-Semitic and having a multicultural constituency of support and membership is true 'to an extent', but he characterises the movement as 'new far right' in as much as it has switched the object of demonisation from ethnic minorities (the target of the traditional far right) to Islam or Muslims.

Thus he calls the EDL a social movement with a ‘new far right’ ideology combining ‘ultra-patriotism; a critique of mainstream politics; and an aggressive, anti-Muslim agenda’ (2011a: 5). Copsey’s (2010: 5) preferred definition is similar; the EDL is an ‘Islamophobic new social movement’. Moreover, the identification of the movement as anti-Muslim or Islamophobic allows its differentiating features – the absence of anti-Semitism and homophobia – to be interpreted as strategically deployed rather than genuinely held principles, on the basis that ‘enemies’ of Islam (Jews and sexual minorities) are ‘our’ allies. Bartlett, Birdwell and Littler (2011: 29) conclude, rather differently, that the EDL is a ‘populist street movement’. In place of an adjectival qualifier characterising the political or ideological nature of the movement, Bartlett, Birdwell and Littler simply note the gap between the EDL’s own casting of its objectives in the language of human rights and the assertions by its critics that the group is ‘racist’ and ‘Islamophobic’.

The interpretivist approach – which seeks to know the social world through understanding the meanings actors ascribe to it – underpinning the research conducted for this book would provide epistemological justification for taking a similar position to Bartlett, Birdwell and Littler or, indeed, adopting the self-ascription of the object of study. The political implications of simply accepting the EDL’s description of itself as a human rights organisation protesting against radical Islam, however, rule out that option in this case. Rather, the self-understandings of the organisation and its members are treated as objects of critical analysis themselves (see Chapter 2 and Chapters 4–6) and, on the basis of this, the EDL is referred to in this book as an anti-Islamist movement. While not wishing to pre-empt the discussion in those later chapters of the rationale and evidence for, as well as the conditionality of, this characterisation of the movement, it is rooted in two principal judgements. The first is that the EDL is a movement of the ‘populist radical right’ rather than ‘extreme’ or ‘far’ right. This is based on the typological distinction drawn by Mudde (2007: 25) according to which ‘populist radical right’ characterises parties and movements that are nominally democratic (although oppose some fundamental values of liberal democracy) whilst upholding a core ideology combining nativism, authoritarianism and populism in contrast to movements of the ‘extreme right’, which are inherently anti-democratic (2007: 31). The argument for this, detailed in Chapters 2 and 8, is that, although sharing with more extreme right movements an ultra-patriotic agenda, and being populist in its claims to promote the concerns of ‘ordinary people’ against a liberal elite political hegemony, the EDL does not reject the principles of a democratic constitutional state or of fundamental human equality, does not uphold an ideology of racial supremacy and promotes women’s and LGBT rights. It reflects, secondly, that amidst wide political and ideological diversity within the movement, frequent slippage between official positions and everyday talk and the conceptual ambiguity and confusion embedded in terms such as ‘Islamophobia’, the common denominator identifiable among EDL activists in this study is anti-Islamism. This characterisation of the movement is not without precedent (see Quilliam, 2013)⁶ and is discussed further in Chapter 5.

'Accepted racism'? Islamophobia, racism and 'race'

For many, not applying the descriptor 'racist' or 'Islamophobic' to the EDL will appear a political misjudgement. It is done, however, in the knowledge that viewing racism as exceptional – the expression solely of the 'extreme right' – risks reinforcing 'the status quo of exonerated, guiltless institutional forms and responsible individuals' (Goldberg, 2006: 353) and making racism 'the problem of the ignorant working class' (Lentin, 2008: 500). Racism is not the property of extremist groups or misguided individuals but of us all. That racism remains a defining dimension of social relations is self-evident. The issue of contention is how racism, or more accurately the political struggle against racism, relates to the notion of 'race'. The fact that 'race' is socially constructed – bereft of any sustainable biological foundation – is well established and has led to the recognition that the social phenomenon we are dealing with is not different 'races' but 'the *racialization* of different "groups" that are culturally, socially and historically constituted' (St Louis, 2002: 652). At the same time, 'race' continues to have a '*social materiality*, "real" or "imagined"' (2002: 653) as well as the capacity to order social relations through its social product, that is, racism. In this sense the terminology of 'race' 'is an inescapable predicate for the discussion of anti-racist and post-racial possibilities' (2002: 654) as well as a politically powerful way to speak loudly how racialisation continues to impact on real lives. The danger is that, by holding on to 'race', we allow it to take on a reified status (Nayak, 2006: 414), grossly reduce the complexity of individual and collective identities and hinder movement towards a political future not constrained by 'race'. Since the reproduction of 'race' is a prerequisite for racism, arguably the first step towards a more progressive politics, capable of not only fighting but dismantling racisms, might be the excising of the discourse of 'race' (Paul, 2014: 704). These arguments for and against a conscious renunciation of 'race' are returned to in Chapter 4.

The connection between racism and Islamophobia is, according to Garner and Selod (2015: 11), already 'definitively made'. 'Islamophobia' can be operationalised to understand 'a set of ideas and practices that amalgamate all Muslims into one group and the characteristics associated with Muslims (violence, misogyny, political allegiance/disloyalty, incompatibility with Western values, etc.) are treated as if they are innate' (2015: 13). Thus Islamophobia constitutes a form of racialisation (Vakil, 2010: 276; Klug, 2012: 675). Both the robustness of Islamophobia as a concept and its connection to racism and anti-Muslimism (Halliday, 1999) are central to understanding and evaluating claims by EDL activists that they are 'not racist', and this is discussed in detail in Chapter 5. Here it is noted simply that the use of the term 'phobia' (denoting an individual pathology) risks presenting anti-Islam or anti-Muslim sentiments as individual and psychological rather than social, structural or systemic (Garner and Selod, 2015: 13), generating the same effect as in the dismissal of racism as an 'exception' noted above. However, for now the term is employed as if unproblematic in order to contextualise EDL activism within a wider rise in Islamophobia in the UK.

Islam is an established part of society and culture. Census data (2011) for the population of England and Wales show that 2.7 million people (4.8 per cent) identify themselves as Muslims,⁷ making it the second largest religious identification and Islam the fastest-growing religion (Jivraj, 2013: 16). This mirrors the wider European picture; around 5 per cent of 425 million EU inhabitants are Muslim (Helbling, 2012: 2). However, the intense political, media and police scrutiny of Muslims has also become an established part of society, marking Muslims out as distinct from the larger political, social and cultural landscape, whilst simultaneously homogenising them in ‘a single category or “community” defined solely through faith, which is itself a shorthand for a range of pathologies’ (Alexander, 2013: 3). This, it is argued, has meant that ‘Islamophobia has somehow become a kind of “accepted racism”’ (Hafez, 2014: 479).

Islamophobia in the UK appears to be widespread and increasing. A meta-analysis of the findings of 64 opinion polls (2007–10) on attitudes toward Muslims suggests that Islamophobia is by far the most pervasive form of religious prejudice in Britain and is higher than it was in 2001–06 (Field, 2012: 158). According to Field, depending on the specific question asked, between one-fifth and three-quarters of the UK population hold anti-Muslim or anti-Islam attitudes. One explanation for these perceptions is that they are driven by the impact of 9/11 and other terrorist attacks, or more specifically, by subsequent media debates and policy responses. While there is clear evidence of an immediate rise in anti-Muslim and anti-Islam sentiments following major events (Strabac and Listhaug, 2008: 274), a series of studies suggest that, across Europe, attitudes and policies show more continuity than radical break, pre- and post-9/11 and that thus 9/11 had an immediate but short-lived impact on public attitudes to Muslim migrants (Helbling, 2012: 12). Another explanation might be that the growth in the Muslim population leads to growing hostility, not least in times of economic crisis. While, at country level the evidence does not support a general correlation between size of Muslim population and anti-Muslim prejudice (Strabac and Listhaug, 2008: 268), within-country differences may be obscured in nationally representative survey samples; in the UK, for example, relative density of Muslim populations varies significantly across localities with a number of urban centres having Muslim populations of 20 per cent and localities with the highest densities standing at 35 per cent (Jivraj, 2013). This has led to suggestions – most notably in the Cattle report (2001), which followed the inquiry into civil unrest that took place in some northern English towns – that Muslim communities have a tendency to lead ‘separate’ or ‘parallel’ lives (Meer and Modood, 2014: 659). This argument underpins much of subsequent government policy designed to increase ‘social cohesion’. However, the 2011 census shows that the Muslim population is relatively evenly spread through England and Wales; in 2011, the Index of Dissimilarity was 54 per cent,⁸ a decrease in the separation factor by two percentage points since 2001 (Jivraj, 2013: 17–18). Moreover, the fact that Muslims tend to live in areas that are diverse in terms of ethnicity and religion – Muslims live in areas where on average there are only 15 per cent Muslims – undermines claims of a tendency to self-segregation.

At the level of identity, empirical data also show that Muslim communities are well integrated on indicators measuring support for democracy (trust and efficacy) and sense of belonging to Britain (Sobolewska, 2010: 41). Citizenship Survey data show that levels of trust in British political institutions among Muslims are similar to, or higher than, those of non-Muslims (Bleich and Maxwell, 2012: 48). Notwithstanding the fact that Muslim respondents are most likely to claim that religion is an important, or the most important, part of their identity, these data also indicate that their levels of positive British identification are similar to, if not higher than, those of non-Muslims and the overall population (2012: 47–48). Heath and Demireva (2014: 171) also find, on the basis of the analysis of the 2010 Ethnic Minority British Election Survey (EMBEs), high levels of British identity even in the first generation of ethnic minority groups and that the second generation is markedly more likely to feel British than the first generation (up by 25 percentage points). Those least likely to feel British, moreover, are not ethnic groups of Muslim faith but those of black Caribbean heritage (2014: 172). While this survey suggests that people of Pakistani and Bangladeshi background show the highest level of concern about intermarriage with a white person, they are no more inclined to reject integration into British society, to reject a British identity or to contemplate violent protest than are other ethno-religious groups (2014: 172–76). While Sobolewska (2010: 43) does identify a greater sense of alienation, exclusion and disaffection among young British-born Muslims than among their immigrant counterparts, this appears to be explained primarily by age; when Muslims under the age of 35 are compared with other (mostly white British) young people, the difference in the level of political alienation almost completely disappears. These results run directly counter to fears about Muslim alienation from the mainstream national community in Britain. Indeed, according to Clarke and Garner (2010: 203) it is not ethnic minority groups but the white English who are increasingly withdrawing from Britishness and retreating into a defensive space of Englishness.

This retreat by the white working class should be seen in the context of a series of backlashes against multicultural politics that have taken place in the UK in recent decades (Hewitt, 2005). It is accompanied by growing calls by, or on behalf of, them for recognition of the impacts of wider structural change on white working-class communities, which have experienced decreasing wages, reduced employment opportunities and declining social mobility for their children over the last three decades (Kenny, 2012; Lone and Silver, 2014: 178). White working-class resentment is cited as an explanation for racist or anti-social attitudes and represented as an unfortunate but inevitable outcome of inequality and injustice frequently related to the proclaimed failure of multiculturalism (Ware, 2008: 2). This is often expressed in the construction of economic migrants, refugees and asylum seekers as the undeserving beneficiaries of social resources who claim and receive welfare entitlements at the expense of majority ('indigenous') populations. A perception that such institutions favour immigrants over the majority population widens the opportunities for populist parties to propose simple messages that resonate with anxieties, thereby creating further

tensions in the community (Lone and Silver, 2014: 181). The construction of immigrant, ethnic minority or Muslim communities as ‘undeserving’ beneficiaries of government resources has been shown to be central to the appeal of, and support for, the BNP in a number of local contexts (see Rhodes, 2010; Goodwin, 2011a; Ashe, 2012; Lone and Silver, 2014), and as Busher (2013: 72) suggests, the views of EDL activists can be broadly situated within this tradition of backlashes to multiculturalism. In constructing racialised ‘others’ as undeserving, white working-class communities are framed as excluded, discriminated and treated as ‘second class’, invoking notions of injustice and ‘unfairness’ (Ware, 2008; Rhodes, 2010). While this may constitute a well-intentioned attempt to ‘put a face on’ contemporary inequality, the very notion of a distinct social group of ‘white working class’ courts the danger of reframing disadvantage as ethnic identity (and thus obscuring class inequality) (Bottero, 2009: 14). In Chapter 6 these debates are returned to in order to evaluate arguments that at least some of the demands by, or on behalf of, sections of the white working class from which the EDL draws its support ‘merit a more sympathetic hearing by the state’ (Kenny, 2012: 24) against those who argue that such resentments distort the notion of fairness since they are articulated in contexts in which whiteness has historically conferred a guarantee of belonging and entitlement (Ware, 2008: 12) and are premised on assumptions of racially based inequality in which the natural order is one in which ‘we’, not ‘they’, are prioritised (Rhodes, 2009).

Transforming emotion into action: social movements and the ‘far right’

This book proposes to understand the EDL through the prism of social movement studies. This is not without its challenges since empirical studies in this field tend to focus on progressive (and largely peaceful) forms of protest and evade engagement with more difficult far right and religious fundamentalist groups (Della Porta, 2008: 223) or ‘distasteful’ movements (Esseveld and Eyerman, 1992: 218). But it is not without precedent. Klandermans and Mayer (2006: 6–7), in their multi-country study of right-wing extremist activism, start from the premise that right-wing extremist organisations might be seen as ‘a social movement obeying the same dynamics as any other social movement’ and that activism in such movements ‘is as equally rational as in any other movement or organization’. Moreover, as noted above, both Jackson (2011a: 7) and Copsey (2010: 5) have used the term ‘social movement’ to describe the EDL, and the notion of ‘framing’,⁹ central to social movement theory, has been used to understand the relationship between ideology and collective action in both the BNP (Goodwin, 2011a: 157–70) and the EDL (Jackson, 2011a: 18).

What is novel about the approach taken in this study is twofold. First, it takes as its object of study the activism of individual grassroots supporters rather than the EDL as an organisation or movement. This forefronts agency significantly more than the notion of ‘framing’, which, although recognising the importance of the way in which individuals see the world, remains deeply embedded in the

structuralist paradigm of political process theory which posits not social movement actors but the external environment (the state and its political institutions) as key factors in determining mobilisation (Edwards, 2014: 93). In contrast, this study starts from Castells's (2012: 12) argument that social movements are 'made of individuals'. Second, the study conducted for this book is concerned with individuals not for what their socio-demographic profile tells us about the constituency of, and potential for, support for such movements but because the meanings attached by individuals to their activism are crucial to understanding contemporary social movements. The approach taken here builds on a recent re-engagement within the field of social movement studies with the affective dimension of activism; an approach that no longer sees emotions as necessarily opposed to rationality. Thus, the second theoretical starting point of the study is that 'social movements are emotional movements' (2012: 13) in as much as protest starts not with a programme or political strategy but with 'the transformation of emotion into action'.

While more theoretical discussion of emotion and 'affect' in social movements is undertaken in Chapter 7, here we consider briefly what and how emotion is transformed into action. Castells (2012) sees fear (a negative affect) and enthusiasm (a positive affect) as the emotions of primary importance to social movement action. The process of the transformation of the former into the latter takes a number of stages in which other key emotions are evoked. The process starts with individual feelings of humiliation, exploitation, being ignored or misrepresented or anxieties and fear of external threats over which individuals feel they have no control. While anxiety and fear on their own have a paralysing effect on action, they can be overcome if transformed into anger, usually through the perception of an unjust action and the identification of the agent responsible for it. Anger, he argues, is neurologically associated with risk-taking behaviour and thus facilitates participation in collective action. It is through the expression of anger in networked social movements, and the 'togetherness' they generate, that individuals' fears are turned into outrage and outrage into hope (2012: 2–3, 14–15). Once the individual overcomes fear, positive emotions take over, as enthusiasm activates action and hope anticipates the rewards for the risky action.

Castells's somewhat idealistic view of this process may emanate from the particular movements that form the focus of his study and is not a model that can be applied directly to the case of the EDL. There is also a good deal of slippage in the kinds of emotions he refers to and between individual feelings, their social expression as emotions and the experience of 'affect' (see Chapter 7). Collins understands the process of how emotions are turned into action as one of the 'emotional dynamics' of social movements (Collins, R., 2001: 27). Drawing on Durkheim's concepts of collective ritual and 'collective effervescence', he argues that the success or failure of collective mobilisation is dictated by the degree of 'emotional transformation' that takes place as a result of collective rituals. Emotional transformations are of two kinds. They may amplify the original emotion, for example making an initial moral outrage stronger through becoming the object of collective focus. Alternatively, they may transform the initiating emotion into something else; an 'emotional energy' which arises out of the consciousness of

being bound up within a collective focus of attention and fuelling a sense of solidarity. More emotional energy produces greater solidarity and thus likelihood of successful mobilisation of a movement (2001: 29).

However, emotions do not always produce positive 'affective solidarity' (Juris, 2008: 66). Protests are subject to ebbs and flows of emotion and protesters are often disappointed when protests fail to generate anticipated levels of emotional intensity (2008). Emotions and relationships can also be destructive; frustration, jealousy, envy, disgust and hatred can pull groups apart (Klatch, 2004: 489). Moreover, Collins's claim that understanding the levels of emotional energy generated allows us to predict whether movements will succeed or fail attaches too much weight to agency and emotions. It is argued in this book that, in the case of the EDL, while activism generates high levels of emotional energy, the degree to which emotional transformation is possible is tightly constrained by structural factors, especially the relationship of the movement with the external political realm. If societies are mechanisms for the distribution of hope (Hage, 2003: 3, cited in Ware, 2008: 9), disconnection from society means dispossession of hope. Thus, in the case of the EDL, while individual anxieties, through togetherness, are transformed into outrage or anger, the subsequent translation of outrage into 'hope' through activism in the movement is not accomplished.

Individuals in focus: the research design

This study of the EDL was undertaken as part of the MYPLACE (Memory, Youth, Political Legacy and Civic Engagement) project.¹⁰ It was one of forty-four ethnographic case studies conducted in fourteen European countries designed to explore the meanings attached to activism among young people engaged in organisations and movements ranging from student self-organisation and youth sections of political parties through anarchist and Occupy groups to radical right-wing movements. While the youthful profile of the EDL was a key motivating factor for selecting it as a case study, this study is not restricted to *youth* activism. Although recruitment to the survey and interview elements of the MYPLACE project was strictly confined to the target group of 16–25 year olds, this was relaxed for ethnographic studies due to the importance of older gatekeepers or authority figures in accessing and understanding the groups researched. Thus, while there is an 'oversampling' of young people in this study, respondents ranged in age from 15 to 49 years (see Chapter 3).

Ethnographic case studies were employed, in the wider research design, to elucidate the meanings attached to activism by those actively engaged in movements or organisations. It follows that the object of analysis was the individual, not the organisation or the ideology of the movement. While the importance of hearing individual voices in the context of the ideological traditions of movements in which they are expressed (Billig, 1978: 9) is acknowledged, given the contemporary state of scholarship on the 'far right' – which focuses on the study of party and organisational ideologies, while individuals feature primarily in terms of the socio-demographic constitution of 'supporters' of such movements – the

approach adopted here was to forefront individual activists and understand members of such organisations 'as individuals with real lives' (Ezekiel, 1995: xxxv). The politics and ethics of researching 'distasteful' groups in such a 'close up' way is complex and contentious; a thorough discussion of these issues is undertaken in the following chapter.

Conclusion

Understandings of, and responses to, movements such as the EDL, while on the surface politically charged, in practice may be politically complacent. The UK has often felt itself comfortably immune from political challenges from the far right, seeing the polity as protected by a weak fascist political heritage and a first-past-the-post political system. Placing a movement such as the EDL on the extreme right and seeking to understand its activism through the paradigm of far right studies allows it to be dismissed politically, as well as condemned morally. However, base levels of xenophobia and anti-immigrant prejudice in the UK are similar to those in most western European countries, suggesting that the same reservoir of support for the populist radical right exists in the UK as elsewhere in Europe. Moreover, having more in common with populist radical right than classic 'far right' movements (Mudde, 2007: 25), the EDL presents a new challenge to politics in the UK in as much as the attitudes and views articulated constitute a radical variant of views found in wider society rather than 'a "normal pathology" unconnected to the mainstream' (2007: 297).

This book takes the EDL seriously, academically and politically. In Chapter 1, it sets out the rationale for conducting ethnographic research with movements of the far right and in Chapter 2 gives an overview of the origins, trajectory and structure of the EDL as an organisation. In Chapter 3 it introduces the activists participating in the study, setting their participation in the EDL within whole lives and considering their personal trajectories in and out of activism. In Chapter 4 claims to non-racism by activists are critically explored. Since key arguments underpinning such claims are that 'a religion is not a race' and that the EDL is anti-(militant) Islam not anti-Muslims, Chapter 5 analyses in detail attitudes to Islam and Muslims among grassroots activists. The analysis in these two chapters is set in the context of theoretical debates about 'race', racism and post-racialism as well as whether Islamophobia should be seen as a distinct phenomenon or the latest manifestation of 'new' or 'cultural' racism. Chapter 6 turns the gaze away from the Muslim 'other' and towards EDL activists' construction of 'self' as devalued and discriminated white working class in the narrative of 'second-class citizens'. In Chapter 7 the emotional and affective dimensions of EDL activism are explored through the pleasures of the 'demo buzz' and the ontological security generated by relationships formed in the EDL 'family' whilst recognising the intimate connection between emotion, affect and *meanings* attached to activism at the cognitive level. This, it is suggested, is epitomised in the understanding of EDL activism as standing 'loud and proud' in an emotional expression of the rational demand to 'be heard'.

Notes

- 1 The terms 'extreme', 'far', 'radical' and 'populist' are often used interchangeably to refer to that part of the political spectrum that rejects wholly, or in part, hegemonic notions of liberal democracy. In this book, when citing published literature, the terms used in the original works are retained. I refer to the English Defence League as 'populist radical right' rather than 'extreme' or 'far' right based on the typological distinction drawn by Mudde (2007: 25) discussed below.
- 2 Those included in the UK case are the British National Party, the National Front and the Democratic Unionist Party.
- 3 The British National Party (BNP), founded in 1982 as an outcome of one of the splits in the National Front, has had more success than any other party of the far right in Britain, winning 6.2 per cent of the vote (although no parliamentary representation) in the 2010 General Election (Goodwin, 2011a).
- 4 Respondents are classified as 'xenophobic' if they include one or more of the categories 'Muslims', 'immigrants' or 'people of a different race' among those they say they would not like to have as neighbours.
- 5 This figure is based on EVS data for 1999–2000 using the proportion of respondents naming 'immigrants' as people they would not like to have as neighbours.
- 6 Quilliam (2013) describes the EDL as an 'anti-Islamist group'.
- 7 This question on religious affiliation is voluntary and has been included only since the 2011 census. Its introduction was advocated by the Muslim Council of Britain with the aim of facilitating policies to tackle inequalities experienced by Muslims (Meer and Modood, 2014: 12).
- 8 The degree of residential separation measured using the Index of Dissimilarity compares the percentage of a group's total population in England and Wales that lives in a local authority with the percentage of the rest of the population living in that same local authority. The absolute differences in percentage are added up across the 348 LAs of England and Wales, and then halved so that the Index is between 0 and 100 (Jivraj, 2013: 18).
- 9 'Framing' is a concept drawn from Goffman's understanding of the way in which experience is ordered and constructed to render it knowable (Edwards, 2014: 93).
- 10 The research was funded under the European Union Seventh Framework Programme (Grant Agreement number FP7-266831). The project employed a mixed method (survey, interviews, ethnographies) and case-study approach to map the relationship between political heritage, current levels and forms of civic and political engagement of young people in Europe, and their potential receptivity to radical and populist political agendas. The project coordinator was Hilary Pilkington.