

ROUTLEDGE STUDIES IN EXTREMISM AND DEMOCRACY

# The Making of Anti-Muslim Protest

Grassroots activism in the English  
Defence League

Joel Busher



A deeply penetrating study of a movement that shatters conventional ideas of left/right and racist/antiracist. Busher's skilled and sensitive ethnography provides new insight into how the EDL created a shared world of anti-Muslim activism, and how this world unraveled in a cycle of resentments, infighting, and skepticism.

**Kathleen Blee**, *Distinguished Professor of Sociology, University of Pittsburgh, USA*

Approachably written and closely observed, this book gets inside the life world of EDL activists – a bunch of people more complicated and varied than commonly imagined. Anyone wishing to understand the complexity and the contradictions at the heart of the English Defence League should read Joel Busher's fascinating book.

**Tim Bale**, *Professor of Politics, Queen Mary University of London, UK*

Political causes emerge, change, cross-breed, and subside in complex ways. The English Defence League is a fascinating case, which emerged from networks of football hooligans, became a lightning rod for anti-Muslim sentiment, and yet resisted the racist slogans of the far Right. This fine book takes us inside the heads – and hearts – of the League's participants.

**James M. Jasper**, *The Graduate Center of the City University of New York, USA*

Stepping in the shoes of English Defence League activists, Joel Busher paints an insightful inside-picture of the British anti-Islam movement. Years of carefully documented fieldwork yield a thick and rich description of a movement that rocked Great Britain for some time.

**Bert Klandermands**, *Professor of Applied Social Psychology, VU-University Amsterdam, the Netherlands*

The English Defence League has been labelled fascist, racist, and extremist; its foot-soldiers have been disparaged as mindless thugs. Joel Busher is no EDL-sympathizer, and yet confronts such glib generalizations in this lucid and penetrating

book. Busher really gets up close to reveal the essential heterogeneity of those who took to the streets and marched under the EDL banner. This is a superlative study. Everyone with an interest in anti-Muslim activism should read it.

**Nigel Copsey**, *Teesside University, UK*

Busher's *The Making of Anti-Muslim Protest: Grassroots Activism in the English Defence League* is a masterful piece of story-telling, sewn together with solid theoretical insights into the individual and ecological dynamics that help to explain the rise, fall, and continuity of the EDL. This 'boots on the ground' approach allows us to hear clearly how members at once distanced themselves from 'racist' identities while nonetheless avowing 'racist' sentiments.

**Barbara Perry**, *University of Ontario  
Institute of Technology, Canada*

# The Making of Anti-Muslim Protest

Activism in any social movement group is, as Deborah Gould observes, a project of collective ‘world-making’. It is about changing the world out there by influencing policy and public opinion, but is also about the way it transforms the lives of participants – activists generate new identities, cultures, social ties, rich and varied emotional experiences and interpretations of the world around them. Movements are more likely to be able to attract and sustain support when as projects of collective world-making they feel compelling to activists and would-be activists.

In this book, Busher explores what has made activism in the English Defence League (EDL), an anti-Muslim protest movement that has staged demonstrations across the United Kingdom since 2009, so compelling to those who have chosen to march under its banner. Based on 16 months of overt observation with grassroots activists, he explores how people became involved with the group; how they forged and intensified belief in the EDL cause; how they negotiated accusations that they were just another racist, far right group; and how grassroots EDL activism began to unravel during the course of 2011 but did not do so altogether. Providing a fresh insight as to how contemporary anti-minority protest movements work on the inside, this book will be of interest to students, scholars and activists working in the areas of British politics, extremism, social movements, community relations and current affairs more generally.

**Joel Busher** is a Research Fellow at the Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations, Coventry University, UK.

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# Abbreviations

ASBOs	anti-social behaviour orders
ASWJ	Ahlu Sunna wal Jamaah
BFP	British Freedom Party
BNIM	biographic narrative interpretive method
BNP	British National Party
BPA	British Patriotic Alliance
BPS	British Patriots Society
CRASBOs	criminal anti-social behaviour orders
CXF	Combined Ex-Forces
EDL	English Defence League
ENA	English Nationalist Alliance
EVF	English Volunteer Force
IOB	Infidels of Britain
IPCC	Independent Police Complaints Commission
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
LGBT	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender
MAC	Muslims Against Crusades
MDL	Muslim Defence League
MFE	March for England
NEI	Northeast Infidels
NF	National Front
NPA	New Patriot Alliance
NPOIU	National Public Order Intelligence Unit
NWFF	Northwest Frontline Firm
NWI	Northwest Infidels
PEGIDA	<i>Patriotische Europäer gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes</i>
PVV	<i>Partij voor de Vrijheid</i> (Freedom Party, Netherlands)
RO	Regional Organiser
SDL	Scottish Defence League
SEA	Southeast Alliance
UAF	Unite Against Fascism

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UBA	United British Alliance
UBP	United British Patriots
UPL	United People of Luton
UKIP	UK Independence Party
WDL	Welsh Defence League

# 1 Introduction

It's not, you know, it's not just running around screaming 'E – E – EDL'. You know, there's a lot more to it than just running around doing that.

(Tony)<sup>1</sup>

## **An introduction to the English Defence League**

Saturday 9th April 2011 was a gloriously sunny spring day in Chadwell Heath, on the borders of the eastern London boroughs of Barking and Dagenham and Redbridge. Like much of London's periphery, in the last two decades, the area has undergone a dramatic demographic transition with rapid inward migration transforming the face (and faces) of what was until fairly recently a predominantly white British and working-class area. On this particular morning, it was playing host to the third in a series of four demonstrations by English Defence League (EDL) activists over plans to build a Muslim community centre on the high street.

The rendezvous point for the demonstration was, as usual for such events, a pub near the allocated protest site. When I arrived there at a little before 11 AM, there was already a crowd of about 40 activists. Most were in the beer garden enjoying the sunshine; a couple were outside talking with police officers, finalising arrangements for the demonstration. Every few minutes, another group of activists arrived: the East Anglia Division, the Portsmouth Division, the Southend Division and so forth. As each group arrived, there were handshakes and embraces and shouts of 'Oi-oi!' As a few more pints of beer were knocked back, the activists chatted in increasingly animated tones, sang their songs and had photographs taken with Tommy Robinson<sup>2</sup> and Kevin Carroll, the EDL's most recognised spokespersons, who by this point, more than two years after the first EDL demonstrations, had acquired something of a celebrity status. After a short while, one of the stewards, a well-known and popular figure in the local activist community, climbed up onto one of the pub benches with a portable loudspeaker. The march, we were told, would be getting under way in about 10 minutes. As was customary, he called on everybody to follow the instructions of the event stewards and the police, and signed off with a 'NO SURRENDER!' that drew cheers from the 250 or so demonstrators now assembled.

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The activists finished off their drinks and made pre-march trips to the toilet. Flags were hoisted aloft or draped over shoulders, and some people wrapped scarves over their faces or pulled down their baseball caps, although most didn't see the need to do so. As the march began the event stewards, dressed in fluorescent jackets, directed the activists, trying to ensure that they kept to the road so that the pavements were left clear for passers-by. There was scant police presence: the two previous demonstrations in the area had both passed off with only very limited public disorder.

The first port of call was the train station. After the first of this series of demonstrations, a young activist had stepped off the platform, apparently to retrieve something he had dropped on the tracks, and had been killed by a train. At each of the subsequent demonstrations, the EDL activists went to the station to pay tribute to their deceased colleague. On the way to the station, some marchers sang and chanted, and a group of activists heckled a young man of Asian background cycling on the other side of the road; others walked along fairly quietly talking amongst themselves. All the while, a couple of men – one wearing a pig-head mask – buzzed around the edges of the procession handing out flyers to passers-by.

On our arrival at the station, there was a marked change of mood. The stewards shepherded the activists inside, and a hush came over the group. Kevin Carroll made a short speech about how the 'young patriot' must not be allowed 'to have died in vain'. Wreaths were laid, and a minute's silence was meticulously observed. Then they all filed back out onto the street, where the volume levels were soon rising again.

The activists continued in the direction of the demonstration site approximately half a mile away. There was no set formation to the procession, although as usual most of the younger activists surged towards the front with most of the older activists and some with limited mobility bringing up the rear. The demonstration elicited a mixed response from onlookers. Some appeared curious, some bemused, some afraid, some irritated: a group of young white men outside a hairdresser's paid no attention whatsoever to the spectacle; an elderly gentleman walked past muttering 'Oh, give it up!' and others hurried past about their business; some residents waved St. George's flags from their front gardens; some motorists hooted their horns in support; small groups of women from black and minority ethnic communities looked on with concern etched on their faces, and a family of Asian origin peered nervously from behind net curtains as a group of young EDL activists pointed and chanted at them until a local EDL organiser intervened: 'No! No! Stop! They're Sikhs! We like Sikhs!'

The demonstration site was at a crossroads on the high street on which the community centre was to be built. Here there was a larger police presence of at least a couple of dozen officers, most of whom positioned themselves between the EDL activists and a small Dagenham Peace & Unity counterdemonstration of fewer than 10 people on the opposite side of the road who sang songs, made peace signs and shook maracas. Most of the EDL demonstrators either ignored them or asked each other whether these were people from Unite Against Fascism

(UAF), an anti-fascist group that had organised several demonstrations against the EDL in the past and with which several EDL activists had already had run-ins.

Coincidentally, there was an open-backed breakdown truck parked on the other side of the road, and some activists were soon clambering over it, dancing and jiggling around to the usual selection of EDL anthems that were being blasted out over a loudspeaker set up beforehand by EDL stewards. After a couple of songs, it was time for the speeches. Some activists listened intently to what was being said on the platform, while others continued to chat amongst themselves. As was usually the case, the speaker who received the warmest welcome and the most attention from the activists was Tommy Robinson. There was solemn applause when the speakers referred to British troops, and pantomime boos at the mention of the local council and Margaret Hodge, the local MP for Labour.

Within 20 minutes of arriving, the marchers were on their way again. To leave the demonstration site, they had to pass the Dagenham Peace and Unity counter-demonstration. Here tempers flared, and despite police efforts to keep the groups separate, insults were exchanged, and an EDL activist threw a full can of beer that struck one of their opponents. Soon, however, the EDL activists drifted away in dribs and drabs in the direction of another pub.

Once there, event stewards herded all the activists around the back into the beer garden, where a barbeque had been laid on. After the previous event in March, some activists had been involved in minor altercations with young Muslim men outside the pub, and the organisers and the pub landlord did not want a repeat of this. Once in the beer garden, there were no more speeches, mass songs or chants. Instead, they soaked up spring sunshine and beer while the local organisers reflected on what they saw as a successful day. Almost every activist I spoke with wanted to convey a similar message: I heard again and again about how the EDL is not a racist, extremist or far right group but a single-issue protest movement campaigning against (militant) Islam and (extremist) Muslims<sup>3</sup> in the United Kingdom. As I left to walk back to the station listening to a group of activists from Southend, Essex, earnestly cataloguing a litany of injustices inflicted on ‘ordinary English people’ by ‘muzzies’ and the ‘liberal elite’ we passed another activist on the other side of the road, drunk, head shaved, leaning back, arms in the air, belly thrust out, bellowing ‘England till I die!’ in the direction of a middle-aged black man no more than two metres away, whose expression showed a mixture of surprise, fear and bewilderment.

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The EDL coalesced into a social movement group<sup>4</sup> out of a series of protests that took place in Luton, a town about 30 minutes’ train ride north of London, during the spring of 2009. The protests had been sparked<sup>5</sup> by an incident in the town on 10th March when a small group of Islamist activists calling themselves Ahlus Sunnah wal Jammah (ASWJ, Adherents to the Sunnah and the Community) – one of several iterations of the now-proscribed Al-Muhajiroun (the Emigrants) – staged a protest during which they heckled British soldiers of the Royal Anglian Regiment taking part in a homecoming parade after a tour of duty in Iraq.



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In the first instance, James Yeomans, a former member of the Royal Anglian Regiment, called a ‘Respect our Troops’ march in Luton for 28th March. He cancelled the event when anti-fascist campaigners warned him that far right groups were intent on hijacking it (Copsey 2010), but there soon followed an application for another march on St. George’s Day (23rd April).<sup>6</sup> This time the application came from the blogger Paul ‘Lionheart’ Ray, a local man with links to what has come to be widely referred to as the counter-jihad movement, a fairly loose network of bloggers, commentators, small groups, and intellectuals mobilising against what they claim is the Islamification or Islamisation of Europe and North America (see Archer 2013, Denes 2012, Kinnvall 2013a, Williams and Lowles 2012),<sup>7</sup> in collaboration with a group of Lutonians calling themselves United People of Luton (UPL). When the request was declined,<sup>8</sup> UPL activists, incensed by the decision, announced that they would instead hold an unofficial ‘Reclaim our Streets’ march. On 13th April, approximately 150<sup>9</sup> activists assembled in Luton, many of them young men associated with Luton’s football hooligan firm, supplemented by protestors who had travelled from as far afield as the West Midlands and the South Coast, many of whom were also associated with football violence (Blake 2011, 14–16). The protest was quickly dispersed by the police, but there were related incidents of public disorder in the town later that day,<sup>10</sup> and the UPL soon called a further demonstration for 24th May, this time in collaboration with March for England (MFE), a self-identifying patriotic group also comprising mainly former football hooligans. MFE obtained permission from Luton Borough Council to march to the town hall to present a petition calling for Sayful Islam, one of the highest-profile ASWJ activists, to be banned from Luton town centre. Shortly before 24th May however, MFE withdrew as the official organisers, throwing planning for the event into disarray. On the day, about 500 people gathered at the designated meeting point. When the protestors arrived in the town centre, a small group of approximately 20 activists, mostly associated with MFE, did continue with their planned route to the town hall, but the majority broke away from the procession as the police temporarily lost control of the proceedings (Copsey 2010). A man of Asian background was assaulted, some protestors caused criminal damage including smashing car windscreens and a shop front, some hurled stones at the police, and there were reports of protestors making their way to Bury Park, a predominantly Asian-heritage area. Nine people were initially arrested (Copsey 2010, 10), and sixteen people were eventually charged with offences relating to these events.<sup>11</sup>

The launch of the EDL was announced via Facebook on 27th June 2009: representing a loose alliance between people who had been involved in the UPL protests and an assortment of other small groups seeking to mobilise around similar issues, such as Casuals United,<sup>12</sup> established by Jeff Marsh, a Cardiff-based football hooligan of some renown and a founder of the Welsh Defence League, and British Citizens Against Muslim Extremists, a Birmingham-based group also with its roots in the football casuals scene.<sup>13</sup> The EDL’s first demonstration took place on the same day in Whitechapel, London, an area with one of the most concentrated Muslim populations in the United Kingdom. The

demonstration attracted around 30 to 40 activists and a substantial police escort. As Blake (2011, 39), himself an EDL activist at the time, notes, ‘although the protest wasn’t an obvious success, more introductions had been made’: the event helped to form the national networks of activists that would underpin the subsequent expansion of the movement (see also Marsh 2010). The following week, there were further demonstrations. In Birmingham, 150 people gathered under a combined EDL/Casuals United banner, while in Wood Green, north London, approximately 40 activists gathered to picket a ‘Life under Sharia’ roadshow being held by Anjem Choudary’s now proscribed Islam4UK, another of the plethora of groups that had grown out of Al-Muhajiroun. Little more than a month later, on 8th August 2009, approximately 900 activists participated in an EDL protest in Birmingham,<sup>14</sup> at which there were significant clashes with anti-fascist campaigners and 35 arrests, mainly for public order offences<sup>15</sup> and, while plans for a further demonstration in Luton were frustrated when the police successfully applied for an order preventing public processions in the town for a three-month period,<sup>16</sup> further demonstrations soon followed in Birmingham (5th September), Manchester (10th October) and Leeds (31st October).

The emergence of the EDL marked a new chapter in the history of anti-minority activism in Britain. Not only had there been little in the way of organised street-based anti-minority activism in Britain since the British National Party (BNP) had turned its attention away from street violence and towards a strategy of community-style politics in the late 1990s (Copsey 2008), but from the outset, there were indications that this was not simply a return to the kind of far right street activism that Britain had experienced in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s when groups like the National Front (NF), Blood and Honour, the BNP and Combat 18 were most active. First, the group’s leadership and a considerable part of its membership sought to distance the EDL ideologically from the conventional far right. There were undoubtedly a number of points of overlap between the protest narratives deployed by EDL activists and those of previous waves of backlash and anti-minority politics in the UK and elsewhere in Europe, such as the prominence of ideas about a looming threat to indigenous British or English culture,<sup>17</sup> and a tendency to apportion at least some of the blame for the perceived encroachment of the dangerous Other to the supposed failings of the ‘liberal elite’, the nefarious influence of ‘the left’ and the malady of ‘political correctness’.<sup>18,19</sup> From the outset, however, the movement’s organisers made it clear that symbols pertaining to known far right groups or to Nazi or Fascist iconography would not be tolerated on EDL demonstrations. Spokespersons for the EDL were, and have remained, at pains to avoid anything hinting at biological racism, maintaining that they are a single-issue group concerned only with (militant) Islam. Early EDL demonstrations offered the initially somewhat surprising spectacle of people sporting ‘skins’ tattoos and other symbols and insignia associated with racism and the far right walking beside people waving Israeli and gay pride flags (Taylor 2010). On 28th September 2009, trying to prove their point, EDL activists from Luton posted a video of themselves in which 16 men from diverse racial backgrounds clad in balaclavas can be seen burning a swastika flag, with a banner

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in the background bearing the words ‘English Defence League, black and white unite’.<sup>20</sup> The video was not well received by some established far right groups.

Second, while some of those attracted to the EDL also supported and had been activists in more conventional far right groups, it soon became clear this mobilisation was not organisationally associated with the established far right (Copsey 2010). It was instead growing out of the fringes of the football hooligan networks and the counter-jihad movement. While far right groups have long sought to draw support from and mobilise through the football hooligan scene (see Buford 1991, Centre for Contemporary Studies 1981) what was unusual about the EDL was that in this case, the impetus to mobilise came from within the football scene itself. In fact, it was seen by leaders of established far right groups as a threat to their support base, and the national BNP leadership soon mounted a campaign criticising the EDL leadership as ‘useful idiots’ for the ‘ultra-Zionists’.<sup>21</sup>

It is difficult to estimate the scale of the support that the EDL achieved, as is the case for many social movement groups that do not participate in electoral politics. The EDL has never had a formal membership system, and even among activists, there were often differences of opinion over what it meant to be part of the group – did it mean attending demonstrations? If so, how many, and how often? Or was it simply a matter of ‘joining’ the group on Facebook?<sup>22</sup> What we can say is that at various points the group’s Facebook following has touched or even exceeded 100,000 (although it is unclear how many of those joining the EDL on Facebook were in fact supporters of or at least sympathised with the group and how many were trolls from anti-EDL groups, journalists or nosy academics);<sup>23</sup> that from 2010 onwards, there have been EDL divisions active in most major towns and cities across England and Wales;<sup>24</sup> and that by early 2011, the group was attracting some international support, with a number of national Defence Leagues appearing across Europe, some of whose activists I encountered on demonstrations in the United Kingdom.<sup>25</sup>

Since August 2009, the EDL has held national, regional and counter demonstrations<sup>26</sup> at a rate of approximately two per month, ostensibly against (militant) Islam and what activists referred to as the ‘Islamification’ or ‘Islamisation’<sup>27</sup> of Britain. Bartlett and Littler (2011) estimate that by early 2011 roughly 25,000 people had participated in an EDL demonstration at some point. As the EDL developed, activists also explored a range of different forms of collective action: leafleting on their local high streets; attempting to organise legal challenges to the construction or renovation of Islamic buildings; flash demonstrations;<sup>28</sup> physically or verbally disrupting meetings and processions being held by their (militant) Muslim or left-wing opponents; spending many hundreds of hours trying to promote their ideas and arguments online, primarily through social media or in some cases by trolling their opponents; holding fundraising events for veterans’ charities; organising St. George’s Day parades and memorials for key symbolic events such as the terrorist attacks of 11th September 2001 (New York) and 7th July 2005 (London); and even attempting to coordinate boycotts of shops and fast food restaurants selling halal products.<sup>29</sup>

Activists were organised ostensibly through a network of local ‘divisions’, each with its own organisers who were usually referred to as ‘admins’ – a term derived initially from their role as administrators on divisional Facebook pages. As of the summer of 2010, these local divisions were, at least in theory, coordinated by a set of regional organisers or ‘ROs’, who worked closely with the national leadership; a system introduced in an attempt to provide the expanding group with a clearer structure (Copsey 2010, 19). In addition to the local divisions, there were also various special-interest divisions that were more or less integrated within the EDL including youth divisions, women’s divisions (known as the Angels), a Jewish division, a Persecuted Christians division with several of its (online) members based in Lebanon, Syria and Egypt, and a Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) Division.<sup>30</sup>

During the latter half of 2011, the EDL began to lose some of its momentum. Throughout 2010, their national demonstrations had regularly attracted more than 1,000 participants, and in February 2011, they managed to mobilise around 3,000 supporters for a demonstration in Luton.<sup>31</sup> Yet in the months that followed, attendances declined: where once national demonstrations had attracted in excess of 1,000 participants, by late 2011 they rarely attracted more than about 500, and the anti-Muslim protest scene came to be characterised by fallings-out between competing factions within the movement that crystallised over time into splinter groups such as the Northwest Infidels (NWI), Northeast Infidels (NEI), Combined Ex-Forces (CXF) and the Southeast Alliance (SEA) among others (see Chapter 6).

As of mid-2015, this wave of anti-minority activism has not however petered out altogether. While the number of people attending events held by the EDL and various splinter groups has declined, they have continued to mobilise on a regular basis and have achieved notable upticks in support after a number of key symbolic events such as the killing of Drummer Lee Rigby by two Islamist militants in Woolwich on 22nd May 2013<sup>32</sup> and the breaking of news stories about systematic child sexual abuse by a network primarily of Muslim men in Rotherham in 2014.<sup>33</sup> On 8th October 2013, Robinson and Carroll left the EDL, but a management committee comprised of nineteen regional EDL organisers was quickly set up to coordinate the group’s activities (Pilkington 2014, 118). This committee was initially chaired by Tim Ablitt, who had been the Southwest regional organiser.<sup>34</sup> He was replaced as chairman in February 2014 by Steve Eddowes, previously the West Midland regional organiser and head of security for the group.<sup>35</sup> The first national demonstration of 2015 took place in Dudley on 7th February, attracting somewhere between 600 and 1,000 participants.

## **About this book**

This book is about activism<sup>36</sup> at the grassroots of this wave of anti-minority mobilisation. It is about how people became EDL activists; how they developed and sustained their commitment to the group, to the cause and to one another;

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and how and why the fabric of this group started to but did not completely unravel between early 2011 and the time of writing in 2015.

The discussion that I present is theoretically grounded in the idea that social movement activism, regardless of the cause around which people are mobilising, comprises a project of collective ‘world-making’, a concept that I have taken from Deborah Gould’s (2009) landmark study of AIDS activism in the United States. Social movement activism is partly about wanting, and perceiving an opportunity,<sup>37</sup> to change the world *out there*, however well- or ill-defined that change might be – it is a ‘politics by other means’ (Gamson 1974, Tilly 1978). Yet social movement activism also transforms and can often enrich the lives and lived experiences of those who participate in it. Through their participation in activism, people collectively produce ‘sentiments, ideas, values, and practices that manifest and encourage new modes of being’ (Gould 2009, 178). In the last 25 years or so, scholars of social movements have documented how participants produce new cultural spaces and codes (Futrell and Simi 2004, Melucci 1996, Polletta 1999), construct collective identities<sup>38</sup> that enable the emergence of both real and imagined communities (Berezin 2001, Casquete 2006, Collins 2001, Melucci 1995), establish, enact and ritualise alternative moral orders (Casquete 2006, Jasper 2007), develop and negotiate cognitive frames through which they interpret and experience the world around them (Benford and Snow 2000, Snow et al. 1986),<sup>39</sup> and achieve and train emotional states and responses that encourage, or discourage, further participation (Gould 2009, Summers Effler 2010, van Troost, van Stekelenberg and Klandermans 2013, Yang 2000).<sup>40</sup> Mobilisation can sometimes be as much if not more about consolidating or creating new identities as it is about affecting public policy<sup>41</sup> and ‘The satisfactions of action, from the joy of fusion [with other activists] to the assertion of dignity [can] become a motivation every bit as important as a movement’s stated goals’ (Jasper 2011, 12).

Social movement groups are more likely to attract and retain participants when ‘as projects in world-making, they are *compelling* to participants and prospective participants hungry to construct alternative worlds’ (Gould 2009, 178, my emphasis) – when they offer participants and prospective participants subjectively *meaningful* collective identities and *resonant* and *fulfilling* cognitive, moral, cultural and emotional structures. In this book, I discuss how EDL activism came to provide a *compelling* project of collective world-making for those who chose to march under the group’s banner. Throughout the discussion, I range across what I conceive of as three broad and intersecting dimensions of this process of world-making: a) the shifting patterns of activists’ social interactions; b) the activists’ development of beliefs about the world around them and their position within it; and c) the emotional energies generated through EDL activism.

*The shifting patterns of activists’ social interactions:* participation in activism shapes both who individuals come into contact and engage with, and how they do so. Activism brings people into contact with other activists, opponents, state actors, sympathisers, different news sources and so forth. Through their interactions with these actors, rituals and behavioural norms are established that then

shape subsequent interactions and might over time crystallise into relationships. I pay particular attention to the personal relationships that shaped and emerged through the activists' interactions. Such relationships are central, not incidental, to activism, especially in largely informal grassroots movements such as the EDL (Blee 2012, 109–133): they shape patterns of recruitment, influence the way that activists organise themselves and are often fundamental to sustaining commitment. Furthermore, participation in activism always entails some degree of reconfiguration of people's personal networks: new relationships and friendships are formed, old ones fade or might be renounced. Exploring these changing relationships can provide us with important insight about the group's social structures, how it manages its boundaries and how activists conceive of their relationship with wider society.

*Activists' development of beliefs about the world around them and their position within it:* activism alters the way that participants interpret and understand the world around them. Through the course of their interactions with other actors, activists form and refine beliefs about the nature of the problem that they are ostensibly seeking to address, about who is to blame and what is to be done (Snow and Benford 1988).<sup>42</sup> The development of these beliefs entails and intersects with the evolution of a much wider set of beliefs: about the strategic and tactical opportunities available to them, about who really exercises power within their society, about the parameters of 'us' and 'them', about the moral legitimacy of different courses of action and so forth. My focus in this book is not so much on describing EDL activists' beliefs in aggregate form – as 'a frame' or 'an ideology' – as it is on describing how beliefs emerged, were negotiated and evolved through their everyday practices and experiences.<sup>43</sup>

*The emotional energies generated through EDL activism:* As well as altering participants' patterns of social interaction and their cognitive processes, activism also entails important changes in people's feelings and emotional responses to the world around them. Activist groups generate what Gould (2009, 10) describes as an 'emotional habitus' – 'socially constituted, prevailing ways of feeling and emoting'.<sup>44</sup> I explore the emotional habitus of grassroots EDL activism, paying particular attention to the group's 'emotional batteries' (Jasper 2011, 2012)<sup>45</sup> – how the impulse to action is generated through the interaction between what we might consider both negative and positive emotions.

In Chapter 2, I discuss the beginnings of people's journeys through EDL activism. I start with a description of the different routes that the activists I knew had followed into the group, before discussing the beginnings of these journeys in terms of the activists' social ties, their initial engagement with the EDL cause and the emotions associated with their first encounters with the EDL. Chapter 3 is about how, once involved in the group, they developed and refined their belief in the EDL cause. Here, as well as exploring the range of materials and experiences that shaped processes of belief formation, I also discuss the social structures of learning within the activist community. In Chapter 4, I concentrate on how activists resisted attempts by their opponents to label them racist and far right, and the implications that this had for the evolution of EDL

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activism.<sup>46</sup> Chapter 5 is about the partial decline of EDL activism that gathered pace during the spring and summer of 2011. I discuss how EDL activism unravelled at the grassroots of the movement and what this can tell us about the limitations not just of the EDL but more generally of EDL-like groups. In Chapter 6, however, I explore some of the factors that have contributed to ensure that anti-Muslim activism in the United Kingdom has not collapsed altogether, at least as of mid-2015.

Using such an approach in research about groups such as the EDL can of course raise difficult ethical questions for the researcher. Is there a danger that by describing the activists' lived experience one somehow inspires not only empathy but also sympathy for their movement? Is there a danger that one's research simply provides them with further oxygen of publicity? Throughout this research, I have wrestled with such questions.<sup>47</sup> However, like other researchers who have conducted ethnographic studies of anti-minority or far right groups,<sup>48</sup> I believe that such concerns are heavily outweighed by the dangers associated with having only a limited and somewhat stereotyped understanding of activism in these movements and that by exploring the internal logics of anti-minority activism, we become better able to hone our thinking about how we develop appropriate and effective ways of responding to and managing the impacts of anti-minority politics.<sup>49</sup>

There are two ways in particular that detailed description of activists' collective world-making can strengthen our understanding of this wave of anti-minority activism. First, it enables us to develop an account of participation in groups such as the EDL that both avoids simply pathologising activists as angry, white, damaged and vulnerable men seeking to protect their social status and reassert their compromised masculinity,<sup>50</sup> and avoids falling back on rather unsatisfactory accounts of activism in such groups as somehow springing forth from generalised anxieties about how the country is changing, perceptions of declining economic and cultural opportunities, declining trust in the political elite and so forth.<sup>51</sup>

There are of course important kernels of truth in such explanations, but they are analytically limited. During the 16 months that I spent with EDL activists I did on several occasions see the rather clichéd images of angry, shaven-headed, heavily-tattooed men with noses shaped by years of confrontation shouting and snarling at their opposition, at the police and into media cameras. Some activists said and did things that I found deeply unpleasant and sometimes disturbing – miming shooting at Muslim women, slipping into racist caricatures about 'muzz-rats',<sup>52</sup> chanting defamatory slogans about Allah and so on and so forth. Yet the vast majority of the activists that I met were in many respects quite normal and rational people,<sup>53</sup> and while I found some of their arguments and actions difficult to stomach, they were for the most part quite comprehensible as long as one was prepared to situate oneself for a moment within their personal logics and experiences.<sup>54</sup> They were worried about their children's future, anxious about how their neighbourhoods were changing, upset that nobody in the public sphere seemed to represent them or their views and, often, looking to make a bit of sense of and give some meaning to their lives. Likewise, survey data indicate

that there are hundreds of thousands, possibly millions, of people in the United Kingdom who are anxious and even pessimistic about the way the country is changing, are sceptical about the compatibility of Islam with Western-style democracy and do not feel that political leaders speak for people like them (Duffy and Lee Chan 2009, Goodwin and YouGov 2013, Harris, Busher and Macklin 2015). Yet only a very small fraction of these people ever seriously think about participating in anti-minority protests, and even fewer will ever become part of a group like the EDL.<sup>55</sup> If we are to explain which of these many thousands of people with ostensibly similar concerns become involved in such groups, when, how and for how long, we need to get closer to the activists themselves and to the interactions that comprised EDL activism.

Second, and at a more meso-level, studying how EDL activism works as a project of collective world-making enables us to develop a more complete analysis than we have at present of how and why such a group has been able to gain and sustain such traction at this particular moment in history. There are several factors that we might point to as enablers of this wave of anti-Muslim protests. Groups such as the EDL can partly be seen as a product of the diffusion of deep and widely held anxieties about Islam and the cultural, political and security implications of a growing Muslim population in Europe. Since at least the late 1980s and the Salmon Rushdie affair, we have seen the relationship between Islam and secular Western democracy repeatedly imagined as a key point of social and political cleavage both nationally and internationally – the (in)famous ‘clash of civilisations’ thesis advanced by Samuel Huntington (1993). While such conceptualisations of the world may find particularly vocal champions in groups associated with the far or radical right, the ‘Islam-as-a-threat-to-European-security-and-values frame’ (Zúquete 2008, 337) has permeated deep into mainstream political and cultural discourse (Adib-Moghaddam 2011, Allen 2010, 2012, 2013, Bonney 2008, Fekete 2004, 2009, Kundnani 2014).<sup>56</sup> As well as helping to cultivate the kinds of anxiety around which the EDL has mobilised, the proliferation of discourses about a cultural clash have also created discursive opportunities for far right and anti-minority groups in the United Kingdom and elsewhere to distance themselves from, or at least keep at arm’s length, traditional and highly stigmatised far right discourses grounded in straightforward biological racism (Poynting and Mason 2007, Rydgren 2005).

Drawing on traditional ‘breakdown’ theories of support for far right or anti-minority politics,<sup>57</sup> we might also interpret the EDL as a product of collapsing trust in the political classes, particularly among those who find it increasingly difficult to identify political leaders who represent them. Garland and Treadwell (2012, 126) for example attribute the emergence of the EDL at least in part to what they call an era of ‘post-politics’ in which ‘the absence of an authentic working-class political discourse and wider political processes in the United Kingdom has left disadvantaged and marginalised white working-class communities that traditionally supported the Labour Party, with no natural political “home”’<sup>58</sup> – a similar argument to that which Ford and Goodwin have made about the fleeting electoral success of the BNP (Ford and Goodwin 2010) and



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more recently about the surge of support for UK Independence Party (UKIP) (Ford and Goodwin 2014). Such an argument is lent credibility by Bartlett and Littler's (2011) finding that online supporters of the EDL express strikingly low levels of trust both generally and in some public institutions.<sup>59</sup> Kinnvall (2013b, 146) has added a political psychological dimension to such theorisations by linking the emergence of the EDL and other anti-Muslim groups to what she describes as 'a pervasive sense of existential anxiety' running through contemporary political debate in Europe and North America.

From a subcultural perspective, it could also be argued that the first decade of the 21st century was a particularly opportune moment to mobilise through football hooligan networks. As Garland and Treadwell (2012, 124) note, over the last two decades a combination of domestic football banning orders and 'prohibitive ticket pricing' have combined to 'make the spectator experience of soccer a less attractive arena in which to seek physical confrontations'. Groups such as the EDL, it might be argued, can provide the kind of opportunities to construct and express an aggressive masculinity once provided by football violence (Treadwell and Garland 2011).<sup>60</sup>

Furthermore, like contemporary social movement groups across the political spectrum,<sup>61</sup> the EDL has undoubtedly also benefited from and made deft use of new information technologies which have greatly reduced the financial cost and increased the speed and reach of internal and external communications (Bartlett and Littler 2011, Copsey 2010, Jackson 2011).

Yet it is important not to be seduced into imagining that the emergence of a group such as the EDL was somehow inevitable. It was not. In fact in many ways it has been a rather unlikely social movement group. Shortly after I began the fieldwork for this book in early 2011, I was talking with senior police intelligence officers at a conference about how their understanding of and responses to the EDL had evolved since 2009. One officer recalled somewhat ruefully that in July 2009, their view, and that of most of the professionals they had spoken with at the time both within the police and in central government and academia, was that it would 'probably all blow over when the next football season started'. There were a number of good reasons for such an assessment. First, and quite simply, it was not the first time that there had been mobilisations against (militant) Islam by groups with their roots in football-related public disorder. In 2004, in Luton, a combination of primarily Luton- and Peterborough-based football casuals had sought to organise a 'Ban the Taliban' march in the town (Harris et al. 2015), and a group called United British Alliance (UBA) had carried out a series of demonstrations against the radical cleric Abu Hamza outside the Finsbury Park mosque in London (Copsey 2010, 9). Yet while UBA garnered coverage even in the national media, these protests never escalated into a major or sustained series of mobilisations.

Second, there is a significant difference between going out once or twice to voice anger and frustration and participating in sustained collective action. Social movement activism of any sort may offer multiple benefits and incentives, but it can also be a costly business. Protest, as Oliver and Myers note, 'is not a

self-reinforcing behaviour' because it 'inherently disrupts the normal rhythms of people's lives' (2002, 9): it may be financially expensive, almost certainly absorbs a great deal of time, may strain existing personal relationships, can have legal consequences and significant negative implications for participants' employment and career prospects, and at some point or another is likely to entail moments of disappointment and despair. The cost of activism is likely to be particularly high in pariah groups where activists face, or at least expect to face, various forms of social sanction ranging from general public disapproval to exclusion from the labour market and even legal sanctions (Bjørge 2009, Blee 2003, Klandermans and Mayer 2006, Simi and Futrell 2009). In spite of their efforts to distance themselves from the established far right, EDL activists soon found themselves confronted by massed ranks of opponents from an assortment of anti-racist groups and were routinely labelled 'far right' or 'racist' by most mainstream politicians and media agencies.<sup>62</sup> While such confrontational situations and concomitant deviant identity might have been part of the allure for some people who became involved in the EDL (see Chapter 2), the fact that they were described in this way undoubtedly undermined the ability of the group to gain purchase among people who did not already identify with the far right, and amplified the social costs of participation.

Third, at least until the fallout from the BNP's disastrous general election campaign in mid-2010, it seemed that political space for a movement such as the EDL was actually quite restricted. At the time of writing this book in 2015, the BNP has largely collapsed back into obscurity. In 2009, however, at the time of the EDL's emergence, the BNP not only appeared to be establishing itself as a political force, albeit a relatively marginal one, but was also mobilising around a political discourse that had significant similarities to that of the EDL: like far right groups across Europe the BNP had since at least the early-2000s been attempting to avoid references to biological racism and had been adopting the strategy of targeting Muslims as the dangerous Other (Copsey 2007, 2008, Goodwin 2011, John et al. 2005, Macklin 2015).

Fourth, while it is relatively common for social movements to comprise 'an uneasy coalition between groups favouring different tactics, often with slightly different moral sensibilities [which] have little to do with each other, even dislike each other' (Jasper 2007, 229), the EDL depended on some particularly unlikely alliances. As described above, their demonstrations provided the somewhat surprising spectacle of seasoned far right activists walking alongside people carrying Israeli flags, gay pride flags and banners stating 'Black and white unite against extremism'. How long could these individuals stand alongside one another without the obvious ideological differences coming to the surface?<sup>63</sup> And then there were the football-based rivalries. EDL activists themselves expressed surprise that the truces between rival football firms held as well as they did. As one Southampton-based activist observed to me as we sat around a table in a pub in Fratton, a stone's throw from the home of Portsmouth FC, their arch-rivals, with activists whose footballing affiliations included Southampton, Portsmouth, Plymouth, Chelsea and Millwall, 'before EDL and March for England, we'd all've been

trying to kill each other!’ before going on to regale us with the tale of his last visit to Fratton, where he had been carted away in a police van for fighting with Portsmouth supporters.

Fifth, and finally, social movement mobilisation, and particularly sustained mobilisation, requires multiple capabilities – communication skills; knowledge about the legal context in which they are operating; experience, or at least links to people with experience of organising similar kinds of events; coordination and management skills and so forth. As resource mobilisation theorists have made clear, outrage and anger alone are not enough (McCarthy and Zald 1977, Zald and McCarthy 1979). One of the striking characteristics of the EDL, particularly early on, was how few of the people associated with the group had any prior experience of social movement mobilisation. In fact during interviews with the national EDL leaders as part of another research project in 2014 (Harris et al. 2015), they laughed about how disorganised and unprepared they had been and how, ironically, they had at least initially learned quite a bit about how to conduct protests by observing their anti-fascist opponents.<sup>64</sup> Although the EDL received some financial, logistical or strategic support from a number of individuals associated with the international counter-jihad movement such as Alan Lake,<sup>65</sup> Pamela Geller and Robert Spencer (Williams and Lowles 2012), there was good reason to doubt whether there would be sufficient wherewithal within the activist community to sustain the group. This situation was exacerbated by the fact that in drawing primarily on politically, economically and culturally marginal working-class communities the EDL was tapping into one of the segments of the UK population that was least likely to be able to supply the kinds of skills or resources historically associated with effective social movement mobilisation.

If we want to develop a comprehensive analysis of movements like the EDL and the ‘ebb and flow of [their] organizational viability’ (Zald and Ash Gardner 1987, 123), we need to understand how activists negotiate these various challenges. Once again, we can only do this by getting close to these activists and observing their interactions with one another, with their opponents and more generally with various other social and political currents.<sup>66</sup> Doing so can help us to interpret what has happened to date, to reflect on how and why our responses have played out the way they have, and also to think about how this kind of group is more or less likely to evolve in the future, an issue that I return to in Chapter 7. One of the reasons why studies of anti-minority groups tend to overestimate the prospects of such groups is that they do not take fully into account the everyday labour required to sustain them.<sup>67</sup>

## **Methods**

The account of grassroots EDL activism I present in this book is based primarily on over<sup>68,69</sup> ethnographic observation of and interviews with activists in London and Southeast England, most of which took place between February 2011 and May 2012. A small amount of additional material is drawn from three subsequent

studies in which I participated: on public responses to anti-Muslim protest (Busher et al. 2014, Thomas et al. 2014) and on the evolution of anti-Muslim protest in two English towns (Harris et al. 2015), as well as ongoing communication with some EDL activists in the London area until mid-2013 and more sporadic contact after that date via Facebook and telephone.

Participant observation was conducted at 22 public events attended by the activists that I was spending time with.<sup>70</sup> Notes were written up or recorded orally as soon as possible after the event, usually within an hour, longer when attending demonstrations outside of London and the southeast of England.<sup>71</sup> These notes were subsequently cross-checked against footage of the events available on YouTube or being circulated within the EDL activist community. I also informally cross-checked my own observations against those of other actors who were paying close attention to the EDL in that part of the country during this period, including anti-racism campaigners,<sup>72</sup> the police<sup>73</sup> and a freelance photographer, Joel Goodman,<sup>74</sup> who had followed the EDL for some time. Participant observation was supplemented by observation of video footage of other public events attended by EDL activists from London and Essex prior to, during<sup>75</sup> and after the main period of fieldwork.

More general observation of the EDL activist scene in the area was carried out through a combination of participant observation at divisional and regional meetings, telephone conversations with activists, meeting up informally with activists and observation of and interaction with activists via social media. As well as observing the official EDL national and divisional Facebook pages, I also had access to online conversations taking place outside these official spaces as a result of becoming Facebook friends with several activists. After the first six months, there were about 60 people within the local activist scene with whom I was familiar and had multiple conversations. These people were mainly concentrated in the western end of Essex and eastern London, although some were located in Hampshire, Kent, Sussex, Bedfordshire, East Anglia and west London. The somewhat erratic pattern of these contacts was a product of who I had been introduced to during EDL events and, to some extent, where I had been able to build rapport. Approximately 75% of these activists were male, 25% female; approximately 15% were aged 35 or younger, 80% aged 36–65 and 5% over 65.<sup>76</sup>

The emphasis placed on observational data reflects the fact that while I was to some extent interested in the ‘big ideas’ around which the activists mobilised, I was more interested in how people engaged with, took ownership of, negotiated and lived out these ideas. As Jasper (2010, 967) observes, it is ‘the little pieces of strategic interaction’ that provide ‘the micro-level building blocks’ of activism. Whether they are shouting at opponents during a demonstration, sharing a link to a news story with other activists, arguing with police officers, getting drunk with fellow activists or even just sitting in a traffic jam together on a wet Saturday afternoon wanting to get home, it is through their everyday interactions with one another, their opponents and various third parties that activists pick up, adopt and adapt ideas; establish routines and rituals that giving meaning to their

actions; and build the often intense personal relationships that can both make and destroy activist groups.

In addition to observational data and the informal interactions with activists that this entailed, interviews were carried out with eighteen core activists. These activists were purposively selected to cover a range of different experiences of EDL activism in terms of the length of time they had been involved and their centrality within the local structures. Of these, 14 were male and 4 female; 3 were 35 years old or younger, 12 were aged 36–65 and 2 were over 65. They were drawn from across the segments of the activist community described in Chapter 2: the football lads, people who had entered the EDL via their involvement in self-identifying patriotic groups, people already associated with far right activism, people already associated with counter-jihad networks, the ‘swerveys’<sup>77</sup> and the ‘converts’.<sup>78</sup> Interviewees were recruited through established contacts within the activist community.

Interviews were focused on the activists’ personal journeys through the EDL and were structured using the biographic narrative interpretive method (BNIM). The BNIM method is a gestalt-based technique developed by Wengraf and colleagues (see Wengraf 2001) in which the interviewer encourages the interviewee to develop an increasingly detailed narrative description of events as they remember them rather than asking them to offer explanations for their actions. Interviewees were first asked to tell the story of their journey through EDL activism in their own words. The initial description lasted anything between 3 and 42 minutes, depending on the respondent, during which time the interviewee was invited to speak without interruption. I then worked my way through this initial response asking progressively for more detail about the events described. The mean length of interview was 101 minutes. Interview data were coded manually, developing codes and nodes<sup>79</sup> organised within three broad categories (relationships, ideas and emotions) that were then stress-tested against observational data.

There were two reasons for using this interviewing technique. The first was because the explicit focus on *describing* events rather than *explaining* their actions lent itself to encouraging the activists to move away from the tramlines of their well-rehearsed narratives about their cause and their concomitant feelings of outrage and injustice. One of the challenges of interviewing activists in groups such as the EDL is that the stories they tell about their lives are saturated with justification and the counter-narrative with which they seek to challenge their opponents and critics – at least partly a product of becoming accustomed to having to defend their involvement in the group in the face of hostile and aggressive opposition. Second, by creating space for the interviewee to narratively explore their own past, the BNIM approach enables the researcher to catch glimpses of the cognitions and emotions of earlier episodes of a person’s life – cognitions and emotions that can be hard to access both as a result of interviewees strategic efforts at impression management,<sup>80</sup> but also because of the way that through multiple conversations with friends and family, strangers at the pub, fellow activists and even the occasional researcher or journalist, activists, like

humans in general, sieve their past out through their present in a way that helps them to make sense of their today and face their tomorrow.<sup>81</sup>

## **An overview of the activist communities in London and Essex**

### *The activists*

By the summer of 2011, there were approximately 200–300 people<sup>82</sup> in and around London and Essex who regularly attended EDL events, as well as a slightly larger number of more occasional activists who appeared from time to time at EDL events but were not well known in the activist community. The activist community in London, Essex and the Southeast more generally was, as might be expected, overwhelmingly white. The handful of activists from ethnic minority backgrounds acquired something of a celebrity status within the group. It was also predominantly male. During the fieldwork period, I estimated that about 20% of participants at the events and meetings that I attended were female, although it is worth pointing out that several of these women played leading roles within the activist community as divisional admins, delivering speeches and stewarding at demonstrations.<sup>83</sup>

In terms of their socio-economic position, the majority of activists I met were either in low-income jobs or out of work, although again it is worth qualifying this by saying that there were several exceptions. I met an activist who was a skilled professional in the National Health Service, a legal underwriter, a former civil servant, several activists in managerial positions either in the retail or the construction sector, and several activists running their own businesses apparently with considerable success. These activists usually came to hold relatively senior roles within the EDL's local and regional organisational structures. Similarly, while many of the activists I met had not progressed in formal education beyond the end of compulsory schooling, several, particularly younger, activists either had completed or were attending further or higher education.

This general socio-demographic picture is broadly in keeping with the findings of Bartlett and Littler's (2011) online survey of EDL Facebook members undertaken around the time that I commenced my fieldwork.<sup>84</sup> Their survey found that 19% of EDL Facebook members were female, that 30% are educated to college or university level<sup>85</sup> and that those identifying as EDL supporters are on average more likely than the general population to be unemployed (p. 18).<sup>86</sup>

Where my findings differ from those of Bartlett and Littler is with regard to the age-range of the activists. Bartlett and Littler found that 72% of EDL Facebook members were under 30, 21% were aged 31–50 and just 4% were over 51 years old. By contrast, I estimated that people under 30 comprised only 35–45% of people attending demonstrations and only 10–20% of those involved as organisers.<sup>87</sup> This difference may well be due to the different ways in which younger and older people engage with online media; I would hypothesise that older people are less likely to become a member of an online group unless they also intend to engage with the group offline.

**Local movement structures**

As in the rest of the country, the activists organised themselves through a series of local divisions, which were at least in principle co-ordinated by a network of regional organisers. In London, activists were spread across approximately 20 EDL divisions in different London boroughs – I say approximately because the number rose and fell on a regular basis as new divisions formed, and others merged or collapsed. There was considerable variation across these local divisions. Some of the larger divisions attracted 20–30 people to some of their meetings and organised local leafleting campaigns; some of the smaller divisions never amounted to more than a Facebook page with a handful of ‘likes’. At least one of the divisions never held a meeting. These borough divisions were the result of substantial reorganisation during the spring of 2011, when what had formerly been the EDL London Division was divided into a number of smaller divisions; a move undertaken with the aim of facilitating better engagement with the public and achieving a better distribution of what was becoming an unmanageable workload for the London organisers.

In Essex, divisions were established in most of the major towns, with much of the leadership based in and around the Thames Gateway in Dagenham, Ilford, Romford, Tilbury and out towards Southend. Colchester and Chelmsford also had particularly active divisions. Local divisions in Essex were by and large more successful in holding frequent meetings than those in London. Throughout the period of fieldwork for this book, the regional organiser for the EDL in Essex was Paul Pitt,<sup>88</sup> who in 2015 featured in *Angry, White and Proud*, one of several television documentaries about the EDL.

Like activists elsewhere in the country, the activists in London and Essex organised and participated in a range of different activities. The largest demonstration in the area during the main period of fieldwork for this book was a static demonstration on the boundary of Tower Hamlets in east London on 3rd September 2011, attended by approximately 1,500 participants. Activists also organised other local, regional and counter demonstrations. Throughout this time, there was never a period of more than a month without some form of official EDL event in the area. As well as the official demonstrations, core activists also carried out several leafleting campaigns (usually, but not always, associated with a forthcoming demonstration) and organised petitions. Some activists took part in attempts to disrupt the activities of opposition groups. For example, on 19th May 2011, a group of around 25 local activists disrupted a meeting of anti-fascist activists and local councillors in Barking and Dagenham, throwing stones at the building in which the meeting was taking place; on July 9th 2011, around 40 activists, mainly established football lads, had planned to disrupt a Hizb ut-Tahrir conference at the Waterlily Centre in London, but were intercepted at a number of nearby pubs by the police and taken to different police stations for the afternoon;<sup>89</sup> on 28th April 2012, a group of about 15 activists gathered in Lewisham High Street in the hope of carrying out a revenge attack<sup>90</sup> on a UAF rally that they believed was going to pass through the high street, although the UAF rally

never materialised due to their truck breaking down; and there were several incidents of low-level altercations with opponents, such as arguments with Islamist groups as Speakers' Corner in Hyde Park, incidents of EDL activists knocking over book or newspaper stalls run by left-wing or Islamist groups and so forth.<sup>91</sup>

### *The particularities of EDL activism in London and Essex*

Conversations with EDL activists, with other people undertaking research on EDL activism elsewhere in the United Kingdom,<sup>92</sup> and with police officers and council officers indicate that there are likely to be some localised variations across the country, particularly in terms of the issue frames that activists used, their tactical tastes and their relationships with the national leaders based in Luton. In this respect, there are three points to which it is worth drawing attention about EDL activism in London, Essex and the Southeast.

The first of these is that, at least when I started my fieldwork, there was a very close relationship between many grassroots activists in London, Essex and the Southeast and the national leaders. The geographic proximity of Luton to London meant that members of the national leadership often attended events in the area – not just demonstrations but also, on occasion, meetings. Almost every core activist I knew in and around London who had been involved with the EDL for more than three months spoke to me at one point or another about a personal conversation that they had had with either Tommy Robinson or Kevin Carroll.<sup>93</sup> This was to some extent also the case in Essex. Both Robinson and Carroll had attended regional demonstrations in the area. During the autumn of 2011, there did, however, emerge tensions between the Essex leaders and the national leaders (see Chapter 5).

A second point concerns the fact that activists in London in particular had some of the most high profile extreme Islamist activists in Europe, such as those associated with Anjem Choudary and Muslims Against Crusades (MAC), another spin-off from Al-Muhajiroun, operating in their area. The activities of Choudary and his colleagues, ranging from small street protests, to holding funeral prayers for Osama bin Laden in London on 6th May 2011, to what they proclaimed were 'Sharia patrols'<sup>94</sup> in Tower Hamlets and Newham, meant that EDL activists in and around London had an almost constant supply of events around which to mobilise and had more opportunity than activists in some other parts of the country to come face-to-face with high-profile Islamist opponents. Several of the London EDL activists came to know MAC activists by name, and vice-versa, and there were even one or two cases of activists on opposing sides clearly developing a certain rapport with one another.

A third point concerns the scale of the black and minority ethnic population in the London area. London is one of the most ethnically diverse cities in world. This basic fact had had a bearing on the lives of all the activists I knew insofar as it was normal for them to have colleagues or neighbours from black and minority ethnic backgrounds, and most also had friends and several had family members (including partners, children and grandchildren) from black and minority ethnic



backgrounds. These relationships took on considerable symbolic importance when seeking to reject claims by their opponents that they were racist or far right, as I discuss in Chapter 4. It is possible that they also contributed to the fact that most of the people I knew were more reluctant than activists in some other parts of the country to use or slip into overtly racialised framings of their cause.<sup>95</sup>

### **A note on terminology: the EDL as an anti-Muslim protest group**

Finally, it is worth providing a brief explanation as to why I have chosen to refer to the EDL as an ‘anti-Muslim’ protest group.<sup>96,97</sup> All ethnographers grapple with difficult questions about the balance they want to strike between adopting the language used by the people they are studying and imposing external conceptual frameworks and categories on them (Atkinson and Hammerlsey 2007, 191–208). These questions are particularly challenging when writing about a group that one does not support personally and that carries a considerable stigma – what Fielding (1993) rather charmingly refers to as ‘unloved’ groups. How does one find a language to talk about the group which gets close enough to the lived experience of its members as to make that lived experience intelligible to readers, without inadvertently eliciting public sympathy for the group or finding oneself accused of being an apologist for them or even a sympathiser?

My decision not to follow the lead of other academics who describe the EDL as some form of new or alternative manifestation of the far right (Copsey 2010, Jackson 2011, Richards 2013b) is not intended as a statement about whether the EDL is or is not *objectively* a far right group – such terminological debates are not my concern in this book.<sup>98</sup> Instead, it reflects the fact that I found the term ‘anti-Muslim’ to be the most useful and philosophically consistent terminology for the task of describing activism at the grassroots of the EDL. It offers three specific advantages. First, describing EDL activism as anti-Muslim rather than far right provides a tighter definition of the subject matter of this study. Terms such as ‘far right’ and ‘extreme right’ can refer to a highly heterogeneous collection of political parties and protest groups (Davies and Jackson 2008, Mudde 1996, Weinberg 1998).<sup>99</sup> While some of the insights from this study might be applicable to this wider extended family of groups and organisations, other findings are likely to be more specific to anti-minority mobilisations that centre primarily on anti-Muslim protest narratives and that seek explicitly to distance themselves organisationally and ideologically from the established far right.

Second, describing EDL activism as anti-Muslim activism rather than far right activism enables a better rendering of the processes of world-making as they have unfolded at the grassroots of the EDL, because it reflects more closely the arguments and identities around which the group coalesced. This approach is consistent with the tradition of reflexive ethnography, in which this study is broadly grounded, where ‘the realities of informants and other subjects within communities studied are characteristically treated as parts of social reality whatever the content of those realities’ (Hewitt 2005, 75). As Jasper (2010, 973,

emphasis in the original) observes, ‘serious efforts to grapple with agency must remain close to agents’ *lived experience*’.

Third, referring to the EDL as an anti-Muslim protest group rather than a far right protest group is one way of guarding against overemphasising one particular set of cultural and ideological influences on the group. As I describe throughout the course of this book, the EDL’s emergent culture and ideology did partly reflect narratives, social relations and protest tactics associated with the far right. However, as I have described above, the EDL certainly did not emerge out of the existing far right – if anything, traditional far right groups spent the first months after the EDL came on the scene scrambling to work out how to position themselves in relation to it. The EDL’s emergent movement culture also owed much to its roots in various other political and cultural currents, including football casuals culture, the growing international counter-jihad movement and even loyalism. At times, it felt more like a convergence of counter-cultural milieux than a ‘new far right’.

## Notes

- 1 All of the names used to refer to participants are pseudonyms.
- 2 Tommy Robinson’s official name is Stephen Yaxley-Lennon. ‘Tommy Robinson’ is in fact the name of a football hooligan of renown from Yaxley-Lennon’s hometown, Luton. Throughout this book, I refer to him using his chosen pseudonym as this is how he is best known publicly.
- 3 Whether people spoke about Islam and Muslims or militant Islam and extremist Muslims varied from activist to activist and across different contexts – during interviews or more reflective conversations, people tended towards the narrower definition; during demonstrations, heated exchanges and moments of bravado they tended towards the broader definition. Throughout the rest of the book, I talk about EDL activists opposing (militant) Islam to convey this ambiguity except where I am talking about specific incidents or individuals where the terminology used was less ambiguous.
- 4 I conceive of the EDL as a group that sits within overlapping social movements rather than as a social movement in and of itself. Social movements, as Klandermans (1992) observes, can comprise ‘multiorganisational fields’. As such, within social movements, we usually ‘find a variety of SMOs [social movement organisations] or groups, linked to various segments of supporting constituencies . . . competing among themselves for resources and symbolic leadership, sharing facilities and resources at other times, developing stable and many times differentiated functions, occasionally merging into unified ad hoc coalitions, and occasionally engaging in all-out war against each other’ (Zald and McCarthy 1987, 161). Conceiving of the EDL in this way is particularly helpful when talking about the more recent fragmentation of the movement (see Chapters 5 and 6).
- 5 As Harris and colleagues (Harris et al. 2015) observe, while this event may have provided the spark for this series of protests, the tensions that manifest had been building for some time.
- 6 St. George is the patron saint of England.
- 7 ‘Key aspects of counter-jihad ideology are an assertive cultural nationalism, which portrays Muslims as a threat to Western values, and a belief in the continuation of a centuries-old effort by Muslims to dominate the West, the existence of a conspiracy to Islamise Europe through demographic change and the stealthy implementation of Sharia’ (Harris et al. 2015).

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- 8 At the time, Ray was under investigation by the Crown Prosecution Service for inciting racial hatred with articles published in his blog (Copsey 2010, 10).
- 9 As noted by Harris et al. (2015), 'It is difficult to establish exact attendance figures for demonstrations, and figures are often disputed'. In this instance 150 was the official police estimate (see 'Illegal Protest Ends Peacefully', Bedfordshire Police, 13th April 2009, [www.bedfordshire.police.uk/pdf/Annex%20B%202009-00670.pdf](http://www.bedfordshire.police.uk/pdf/Annex%20B%202009-00670.pdf)). A report in the *Daily Star* however put the number at 200 (see 'Cops halt "reclaim our streets" demo', Ross Kaniuk, *Daily Star*, 14th April 2009, [www.dailystar.co.uk/news/latest-news/76784/Cops-halt-reclaim-our-streets-demo](http://www.dailystar.co.uk/news/latest-news/76784/Cops-halt-reclaim-our-streets-demo)), and some participants (Blake 2011, 15) claimed that there had been as many as 500 people.
- 10 Six people were arrested. See 'Illegal Protest Ends Peacefully', Bedfordshire Police, 13th April 2009, [www.bedfordshire.police.uk/pdf/Annex%20B%202009-00670.pdf](http://www.bedfordshire.police.uk/pdf/Annex%20B%202009-00670.pdf). On 4th May, there was also an arson attack on Al Ghurabaa Mosque in Luton, which the police suspect was carried out as a revenge attack. See [www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/luton-fights-back-against-rightwing-extremists-1695485.html](http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/luton-fights-back-against-rightwing-extremists-1695485.html).
- 11 See 'Many charged after disturbances as marches are banned in Luton', *Luton on Sunday*, 26th August 2009, [www.luton-dunstable.co.uk/charged-disturbances-marches-banned-Luton/story-21692397-detail/story.html](http://www.luton-dunstable.co.uk/charged-disturbances-marches-banned-Luton/story-21692397-detail/story.html)
- 12 The term football 'casuals' is popularly used to refer to a segment of the football violence scene identified by their adoption of 'casual' clothing style, that is, not wearing club colours.
- 13 See 'English Defence League: chaotic alliance stirs up trouble on streets', Robert Booth, Matthew Taylor and Paul Lewis, *The Guardian*, 12th September 2009, [www.theguardian.com/world/2009/sep/11/english-defence-league-chaotic-alliance](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/sep/11/english-defence-league-chaotic-alliance)
- 14 Birmingham was reportedly identified because it had been the site of an Islam4UK rally at which a video had been made of an 11-year-old boy being converted to Islam: an incident which, as Casciani (2009) notes, 'caused a minor tabloid furore – but a greater reaction on the net, particularly on websites and forums associated with football violence and far-right activity'.
- 15 "'Patriot" league plots more clashes with anti-fascist activists', Robert Booth and Alan Travis, *The Guardian*, 9th August 2009, [www.theguardian.com/uk/2009/aug/09/defence-league-casuals-birmingham-islam](http://www.theguardian.com/uk/2009/aug/09/defence-league-casuals-birmingham-islam)
- 16 'Luton bans marches amid fears of protests', *The Telegraph*, 21st August 2009, [www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/law-and-order/6067813/Luton-bans-marches-amid-fears-of-protests.html](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/law-and-order/6067813/Luton-bans-marches-amid-fears-of-protests.html)
- 17 The notion that so-called ordinary English people are somehow being stripped of their culture has been a central theme of various waves of far right and more general backlash politics since at least the 1960s (Hewitt 2005).
- 18 Richards (2013a, 137) claims of the EDL that 'there are no BNP-style savage attacks on the political establishment for allowing this [Islamist] ideology to make itself at home in the UK'. I did not find this: on the contrary, I found that over time activists developed an increasingly sharp focus on and critique of the political establishment (Chapter 3, see also Blake 2011).
- 19 It was often unclear who qualified as part of the 'left' or the 'liberal elite'. Certainly what activists sometimes called the 'loony left' would have been included – those relatively small groups of activists from organisations like UAF, the Socialist Worker Party (SWP), Antifa and Hope Not Hate who routinely turn out to oppose EDL demonstrations. Trade union groups, Labour and Green Party activists were also usually included, as were certain elements of the media identified by EDL activists as having a particularly strong left-wing bias – *The Guardian*, *The Independent* and the BBC. Other people such as prominent Conservative MPs were rather more difficult to place. On the one hand, actions such as Theresa May's proscription of Muslims

- Against Crusades (MAC) on 10th November 2011 and David Cameron's call, during a speech at a security conference in Munich on 5th February 2011, for a 'muscular liberalism' that challenged the 'ideology of extremism' were welcomed by EDL activists. On the other, both were frequently accused of being too 'soft' and activists often urged Cameron to 'grow some balls'.
- 20 'The English Defence League: will the flames of hatred spread?' Tweedie, N., *The Telegraph*, 10th October 2009, [www.telegraph.co.uk/news/6284184/The-English-Defence-League-will-the-flames-of-hatred-spread.html](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/6284184/The-English-Defence-League-will-the-flames-of-hatred-spread.html).
  - 21 Nick Griffin, erstwhile leader of the BNP, published an 'in-depth report' on the EDL in an attempt to undermine the group (see Griffin 2013).
  - 22 One of the challenges for those wishing to study and understand activism in the EDL and similar groups is that its absence of formalised group boundaries makes it difficult to define who we are talking about when we discuss the EDL and EDL activism. For the purpose of this book, I describe as activists those who regularly took part in demonstrations, may sometimes have gone out leafleting with other activists and, above all, were acknowledged by other activists as 'proper patriots', as one of them. I do not focus on the 'clicktivists' or, as the EDL activists I knew dismissively called them, the 'keyboard warriors'.
  - 23 Bartlett and Littler (2011) estimate that between approximately 10% and 20% of EDL Facebook members could be trolls. It is likely that the EDL Facebook membership also includes a significant number of passive supporters. On the occasions where the EDL Facebook page has been closed down and restarted, it has taken a long time for numbers to return to previous levels.
  - 24 In Scotland, there has been the Scottish Defence League (SDL). The SDL has often supported EDL demonstrations and vice-versa. However, the group has always retained its own identity. Since the fragmentation of the EDL in 2011, the SDL has forged particularly close links with the Northwest Infidels and the Northeast Infidels.
  - 25 Although it is worth noting that attempts to support the emergence of similar Defence Leagues elsewhere in Europe did not gain much support. Approximately 60 EDL activists were opposed and heavily outnumbered by Ajax Amsterdam supporters when they went to the Netherlands (see 'Britons arrested at Amsterdam EDL protest', *The Independent*, 31st October 2010. [www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/britons-arrested-at-amsterdam-edl-protest-2121551.html](http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/britons-arrested-at-amsterdam-edl-protest-2121551.html)), and demonstrations intended to encourage the emergence of Defence League-style groups in Sweden and Norway both attracted pitifully low turnouts (see 'EDL and Swedish Fascists', by Acker Bilk and Pete Norman, EDL News, 25th May 2011. <http://edlnews.co.uk/2011/05/25/edl-and-swedish-fascists/> and 'Norwegian Defence League's anti-Islam demonstration flops', Bob Pitt, Islamophobia Watch, 15th April 2011, [www.islamophobiawatch.co.uk/norwegian-defence-leagues-anti-islam-demonstration-flops/](http://www.islamophobiawatch.co.uk/norwegian-defence-leagues-anti-islam-demonstration-flops/)).
  - 26 Formal demonstrations were organised in consultation with the public authorities and were generally divided into four categories: national demonstrations, regional demonstrations, local demonstrations and counter-demonstrations. The national demonstrations were by far the largest and usually highest-profile of these. They were intended to bring together activists from across the United Kingdom and, once the EDL had started to gain significant momentum and profile, from Defence Leagues and similar groups elsewhere in Europe. The regional and local demonstrations were considerably smaller. The event described at the beginning of this chapter was a regional demonstration. Local demonstrations could involve as few as a dozen or so activists. Because of their smaller size and usually lower media profile these were often low-key affairs with lighter policing and small and often negligible counter-demonstrations. The counter-demonstrations, as the name suggests, were organised in response to events being held by their Islamist opponents.
  - 27 As far as I could tell the two terms were used interchangeably.

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- 28 In contrast to formal demonstrations, flash demonstrations were not organised in consultation with the public authorities. This tactic became increasingly popular among activists in the autumn of 2011 as the EDL fragmented.
- 29 In Bartlett and Littler's (2011, 19) online survey of people who support the EDL on Facebook, 18% of respondents reported having been out leafleting for the EDL, while 52% reported being involved in online activism, 44% in local demonstrations, 11% in flash demonstrations and 5% in legal challenges.
- 30 These special-interest divisions were by and large small, sometimes comprising no more than half a dozen people. They did however act as important symbols of the group's heterogeneity and were used by activists to assert their claims about not being racist or far right.
- 31 Official police estimates for this demonstration range between 1,500–2,000 EDL supporters. The Guardian estimated that 3,000 EDL supporters attended. Estimates from the EDL and some independent observers were significantly higher.
- 32 'Newcastle EDL march attracts more than 1,500', BBC, 25th May 2013, [www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-tyne-22666647](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-tyne-22666647)
- 33 'Rotherham EDL child abuse march costs police £750k', BBC 15th Sept 2014, [www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-south-yorkshire-29207140](http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-south-yorkshire-29207140)
- 34 See 'EDL Select Dorset's Tim Ablitt as New Leader After Tommy Robinson Quits', Dominic Glover, *International Business Times*, 10th October 2013, [www.ibtimes.co.uk/edl-english-defence-league-tim-ablitt-chairman-512972](http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/edl-english-defence-league-tim-ablitt-chairman-512972)
- 35 See 'EDL appoint new leader for moron army', Duncan Cahill, *Hope Not Hate*, 15th February 2014, [www.hopenothate.org.uk/blog/insider/edl-appoint-new-leader-for-moron-army-3434](http://www.hopenothate.org.uk/blog/insider/edl-appoint-new-leader-for-moron-army-3434)
- 36 Throughout the book, I speak overwhelmingly about what activists said and make very few statements about what 'the EDL' did. As Benford (1997, 418) observes, 'movement scholars often write about social movements as "speaking," "framing," "interpreting," "acting," and the like, that is, engaging in activities that only human beings are capable of doing. Social movements do not frame issues; their activists or other participants do the framing'.
- 37 See for example McAdam's (1982, 48–51) discussion of 'cognitive liberation'.
- 38 Following Polletta and Jasper (2001, 284), I understand collective identity to refer to 'an individual's cognitive, moral, and emotional connections with a broader community, category, practice, or institution'. Collective identities are likely to be multi-layered (Gamson 1991, Jasper 2007, Reger 2002). They may form around broad categorical distinctions through which we understand the world around us, for example women, British, academics, working class and so forth; around specific groups (the place one works, the social movement group, the sports club etc.); around sub-groups or cliques (one's specific team in the workplace, the local division of the social movement group or the local church/mosque etc.); and so forth.
- 39 Frames can be defined as 'an interpretive schemata that simplifies and condenses the "world out there" by selectively punctuating and encoding objects, situations, events, experiences, and sequences of actions within one's present and past environment' (Snow and Benford 1992, 137).
- 40 While some emotional reactions might be innate, for the most part, a combination of social relations, culture and cognitions shape 'which emotions are likely to be expressed when and where, on what grounds and for what reasons, by what modes of expression, and by whom' (Kemper 2004, 46). See also earlier work by Clark (1990) and Hochschild (1979).
- 41 A view that can be traced back at least as far as Klapp's (1969) account of social movements as part of broader swathe of practices of identity-searching in the United States of the 1960s. The importance of this search for identity has been given particular prominence within what is often referred to as the 'new social movement' theoretical perspective (Johnston, Laraña and Gusfield 1994, 10)

- 42 Snow and Benford (1988) refer to these as the diagnostic and prognostic tasks.
- 43 One of the criticisms of the framing perspective, offered by one of the primary contributors to the literature on frames and framing, is that if we approach frames as ‘things’ that can be captured and preserved, we risk generating an overly static and homogeneous impression of activism and activists (Benford 1997, 415).
- 44 In the last two decades, as social movement researchers have sought to flesh out accounts of the motivation for and meaning given to activism they have dedicated increasing attention to the role of emotions (see Goodwin, Jasper and Polletta 2001, Jasper 1998, 2011), an endeavour stimulated and facilitated by the emergence of a much larger body of social and psychological research that has theorised emotions and encouraged the integration of the affective dimension into social and political analysis (Collins 2004, Demertzis 2013, Denzin 2007 [1984], Stets and Turner 2007, Turner 2009). As well as generally providing a thicker description of activism, exploring the emotional energies of activism has, for example, enabled researchers to develop more compelling explanations of how and why particular cognitive frames are more or less effective at generating mobilisation (Robnett 2004, Schrock, Holden and Reid 2004, van Stekelenburg and Klandermans 2013), of the mechanisms through which social ties and collective identities can give rise to or sustain collective action (Goodwin and Pfaff 2001, Nepstad and Smith 2001), of the struggle for attention between competing movements (Collins 2001) and of how even groups that appear, at least from the outside, to be chronically failing can sustain themselves (Summers Effler 2010).
- 45 Emotional batteries, work ‘Just as a battery works through the tension between its positive and negative poles’ (Jasper 2011, 7). He cites as examples pride and shame, pity and joy, hope and fear. In his 2011 article, Jasper talks about ‘moral’ rather than ‘emotional’ batteries, but the two publications complement one another.
- 46 Attempts to resist negative definitions imposed on them by opponents have long been identified as an important part of the process through which activists construct collective identities (Taylor and Whittier 1992)
- 47 Such concerns are one of the reasons why until relatively recently scholarship on the far right has tended to analyse these movements ‘from a distance’, with a focus on ‘the economic, social, attitudinal, or cultural environments that nurture organized racism and right-wing extremism rather than the dynamics of the far right itself’ (Blee 2007, 120).
- 48 Such as Blee’s (2003) account of women’s participation in race-hate groups in the United States, Simi and Futrell’s (2010) account of the ‘spaces of hate’ through which white power activism operates and Virchow’s (2007) description of protest in the German far right. As Barrett-Fox (2011, 16) argues, ethnographers of such groups aim for comprehension, and may use empathy as a tool to achieve it. However, ‘the goal is not to create an apologetic portrait of racists or antisemites or homophobes, but one that captures the complexities of their lives’.
- 49 When we don’t fully understand the internal dynamics of a group, we run the risk that intervention might have negative unintended consequences. In the case of groups such as the EDL, these might include radicalising elements within the group, making it more difficult to police or reinforcing in-group solidarity (Klandermans and Mayer 2006, Linden and Klandermans 2006). I return to these issues later in the book. A similar point is made by Klein (1995) in relation to street-gangs.
- 50 Several early studies of participation in far right activism, informed by a psychoanalytical tradition, explored it as a form of personality disorder and emphasised the irrationality of participants (see Adorno et al. 1954, Lasswell 1933). Such approaches have largely been eschewed in more recent accounts of activists involved in far right and anti-minority groups (see especially Blee 2003, Caiani, della Porta and Wagemann 2012, Klandermans and Mayer 2006). As Cohen (1988, 88) observes, there are ‘plenty of “rigid authoritarian personality types”’ to be found in other walks of life, including ‘the anti-racist movement, for example’.

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- 51 As Githens-Mazer (2010) argues in his critique of debates about ‘Islamic radicalisation’, one of the underlying conceptual challenges for much research on participants in radical political or religious movements is that they tend to draw conclusions based on what are actually outlying cases of the much broader categories, such as ‘Salafists’, ‘Islamists’ or ‘Muslims’ that nonetheless are sometimes given prominence within explanatory frameworks. The same can be said about ‘white working-class’. See especially Rhodes (2011) for a considered critique of discourses about the ‘white working class’ in the context of debates about extremist politics.
- 52 A derogatory term used by some activists to refer to Muslims.
- 53 A finding also in keeping with accounts of activism in more traditional far right groups (Billig 1978, Blee 2003, Klandermans and Mayer 2006, Simi and Futrell 2010).
- 54 As Goffman (2009 [1961], xviii) observes, the behaviour and arguments of most people can be made to seem ‘meaningful, reasonable, and normal’ if one is willing ‘to submit oneself in the company of the members to the daily round of petty contingencies to which they are subject’.
- 55 This distinction between people who share similar views and those who actually become activists is the reason for my scant reference in this book to Goodwin and colleagues’ work on EDL ‘sympathisers’ (Goodwin 2013, Goodwin, Cutts and Janta-Lipinski 2014).
- 56 The reasons for this go beyond the scope of this book, but are discussed extensively in the materials referenced in the main text. For a fascinating and quite disturbing discussion of the mechanisms through which this has happened in the United States, see Bail (2012).
- 57 Explanations of support for far right and reactionary movements have often emphasised the role of social, economic and political crisis and how the impacts of these crises have been most keenly felt among the ‘losers of modernization’, thereby making them particularly vulnerable to the allure of extremist politics (Arendt 1951, Kornhauser 1959, Minkenberg 2001).
- 58 See also Treadwell (2013), in which he argues that if we are to understand activism in groups such as the EDL, we must explore the feelings of precariousness of those who become involved in them.
- 59 Only 32% of EDL supporters reported that they tend to agree with the statement ‘people can be trusted’ compared with a national average of 55%. There was also a significant difference in trust reported in some public institutions: the government (EDL supporters, 13%; national average, 28%); police (37% as opposed to 71%); justice and the legal system (24% as opposed to 50%). It is worth noting, however, that we cannot know the extent to which the exceptionally low levels of trust expressed by Bartlett and Littler’s respondents pre-dated their participation in EDL activism.
- 60 A similar idea can be found in Kimmel’s (2007) description of how skinheads were attracted to right-wing violence because it provides an opportunity to assert and enact a compromised masculinity.
- 61 Castells (2012, 9) is one of several authors who have highlighted that online networks provide considerable opportunities for social movements to exercise what he calls ‘counterpower’ by enabling activists to engage in ‘autonomous communication, free from the control of those holding institutional power’.
- 62 The exception to this was some sympathetic coverage of the group in the *Daily Star* at the beginning of 2011. In the final line of an article titled ‘EDL to go political’ published on 9th February, it reported that ‘In the *Daily Star* phone poll yesterday, 98% of readers said they agreed with the EDL’s policies’. [www.dailystar.co.uk/news/latest-news/175956/EDL-TO-GO-POLITICAL](http://www.dailystar.co.uk/news/latest-news/175956/EDL-TO-GO-POLITICAL)
- 63 Multiple researchers of collective action have stressed the importance of explaining rather than simply assuming the unity and continuity of movements (Blee 2012, 52–80, Gongaware 2003, Klandermans 1992, Melucci 1988, 1995, Reger 2002)
- 64 A claim also made to me by some London organisers.

- 65 'Alan Lake' is also a pseudonym. His name is Alan Ayling.
- 66 Even the most apparently extreme movements emerge out of and continue to develop in relation to more mainstream social and political currents (Blee 2003, Cohen 1988, della Porta 1995, Mann 2004). They evolve in response to changes in political, economic and social structures (della Porta 2008, Kriesi et al. 1995); their protest narratives and action repertoires will reflect, or at least be shaped by, existing cultures of protest and deeper ideas and beliefs about what is or is not a legitimate form of collective action (Tilly 1986, 2008); the ways in which they frame their cause will always be at least partly a product of the cultural tools made available to them by the webs of symbols and meaning already spun by other actors (Snow and Benford 1992, Tilly 1986, Whittier 2004, Williams 1995, 2004); and their evolution will be shaped by their interactions with opposition groups, rival groups and the state (della Porta 1995, della Porta and Tarrow 2012, McAdam 1983, Macklin and Busher 2015, Oliver and Myers 2002).
- 67 See for example studies by Ford and Goodwin (2010), Goodwin (2011) and Garland and Treadwell (2012). Other reasons are likely to include a quite understandable desire to ensure that dealing with such issues does not disappear from policy agendas, as well as a certain degree of risk management – we all hedge our bets when talking about the future trajectories of these groups (for example Busher 2013).
- 68 Whenever I made new contacts, I introduced myself to them as a researcher. I recognise however that the distinction between overt and covert research is not always clear cut. As Bourgois (2007, 296–297) notes, 'we are taught in our courses preparatory to fieldwork that the gifted researcher must break the boundaries between outsider and insider. We are supposed to "build rapport" and develop such a level of trust and acceptance in our host societies that we do not distort social interaction. Anything less leads to the collection of skewed or superficial data. How can we reconcile effective participant/observation with truly informed consent? Is rapport building a covert way of saying "encourage people to forget that you are constantly observing them and registering everything they are saying and doing?"' Calvey (2008) offers a particularly thought-provoking discussion of this problematic.
- 69 Access to the EDL activist community was initially achieved through Charlie Flowers, who had briefly flirted with EDL activism, with whom I was put in contact by Jamie Bartlett, an extremism expert at Demos. I am sincerely grateful to both of them. It is important to emphasise how easy it was to gain access to the EDL activist community, in part because of the common assumption that activists in groups like the EDL are unlikely to welcome the presence of an academic researcher. After I made contact with the EDL London Division, one of the admins came to visit me at the University of East London. We had a lengthy conversation about the group and my research plans, and he invited me to attend a forthcoming demonstration. When I arrived at the demonstration, he presented me to several other activists. While some activists were initially suspicious of me, during the 16 months I spent attending EDL events only one initially refused to speak to me.
- 70 In chronological order: three demonstration in Dagenham (12/03/2011, 9/04/2011, 18/06/2011); protest in support of Tommy Robinson at Hammersmith Magistrates' Court (11/05/2011); Casuals United/EDL demonstration in Blackpool (28/05/2011); EDL demonstration in Telford (13/08/2011); British Patriots Society march in London (20/08/2011); EDL demonstration on the edge of Tower Hamlets, London (3/09/2011); gathering in support of Paul Pitt at Westminster Magistrates Court (15/09/2011); EDL demonstration in Birmingham (29/10/2011); assorted 'patriots' gathering in Whitehall, London (11/11/2011); counter-demonstrations against United Ummah (a follow-on group from MAC) in Grosvenor Square, London (2/12/2011, 20/01/2012); EDL demonstration in Barking, London (14/01/2012); EDL demonstration in Leicester (4/02/2012); a charity walk organised by MFE activists, (6/04/2012); MFE St. George's Day parade, Brighton (22/04/2012); gathering to disrupt UAF event in Lewisham



## 28 *Introduction*

- (28/04/2012); EDL demonstration in Luton (5/05/2012); EDL demonstration, central London (27/10/2012); EDL demonstration in Norwich (10/11/2012) (NB. This was observed from outside the demonstration after meeting up with demonstration organisers immediately prior to the event); flash demonstration outside Abu Qatada's house (17/11/2012).
- 71 Audio and audio-visual recordings were not made during the course of these events due to concern that doing so would further augment the impact of my presence on the behaviour of the activists I was with: the activists tended to play to the presence of cameras in one way or another.
  - 72 Primarily through monitoring the reporting on websites such as Hope not Hate, Searchlight, EDL News, EDL Criminals and Islamophobia Watch.
  - 73 I had a series of informal conversations with police officers at the National Public Order Intelligence Unit (NPOIU) during the course of this research. This took the form purely of an exchange of general ideas about the EDL and the way the group was evolving at the time. No information was sought or shared between us about forthcoming events and operations or, following these, about the roles of individuals who had attended.
  - 74 Joel Goodman was one of the few photographers or journalists believed by the EDL activists I knew to be genuinely impartial in his coverage of the group and had therefore had better access to the group than most. As well as photographing the EDL, he had also spoken at length with a number of activists.
  - 75 During the main 16-month period of fieldwork, there were a number of events that I was unable to attend due to other work commitments, a serious cycling injury I sustained, and in two instances being away on holiday.
  - 76 See the following section for a description of the socio-demographics of the EDL activist community in the area. Younger activists are under-represented in my sample because my primary contact points were through the network of local organisers, the majority of whom were in their 40s and 50s.
  - 77 People who had come to EDL activism with a background in other forms of radical political activism outside the far right (see Chapter 2).
  - 78 People who had come to EDL activism without prior involvement in any of the aforementioned groups (see Chapter 2).
  - 79 Clusters of codes.
  - 80 For example, in order to pre-empt anticipated criticisms that they are irrational hate-mongers and peddlers of prejudice they might emphasise the rational logic of their decision-making or how their decision stemmed from feelings of love towards their in-group rather than hatred and anger towards the out-group (see Ahmed 2004).
  - 81 As della Porta and Diani (2006, 96) put it, 'in constructing their own identity, individuals attribute coherence and meaning to the various phases of their own public and private history', what Spence (1986) discusses as 'narrative smoothing'.
  - 82 Estimate based on my own observation of local EDL events and meetings and the more conservative estimates offered by local organisers.
  - 83 Their doing so was of considerable symbolic importance, used by the activists as a point of contrast with what they claimed was the subservient and second-class position of women in Muslim societies.
  - 84 I had initially considered conducting my own survey, but decided not to once I learned of Bartlett and Littler's survey and once it became apparent that their results broadly coincided with my own observations.
  - 85 Bartlett and Littler (2011, 18) note that the current national rate of higher education participation is approximately 45%.
  - 86 They find that this is particularly the case among 25- to 64-year-olds, where 28% of EDL supporters within this age range were unemployed, compared with a national average of 6%. Among 16- to 24-year-olds, 27.5% of EDL supporters in this age

- range were unemployed compared with a national average of 19.7% at the time of the survey.
- 87 Pilkington (2014) also finds that the EDL activist community in the West Midlands is not as young as Bartlett and Littler's findings suggest.
- 88 His official name is Paul Podromou, but as with Tommy Robinson, for the purpose of this research, I use his chosen name.
- 89 Tommy Robinson, who was among those held, claimed that he just happened to be in London for his stag do. A group of 15 MFE activists also happened to be the area that day. They had been holding a memorial event for the 7/7 bombings, something that they did each year. They had then gone to the Blind Beggar pub in Whitechapel near to the Waterlily Centre where they had also been picked up by the police. They maintained that they had no connection with the plans to disrupt the Hizb ut-Tahrir event. Whether this was true I do not know – there is no way for me to verify these claims. However, their detention for the afternoon became something of a cause celebre among activists in the area, coming to be referred to as 'the Bromley 15'.
- 90 A week earlier, EDL activists from the area had attended an annual St. George's Day parade organised by MFE. The march had been disrupted by an assortment of anti-racist and anti-fascist campaigners, some of whom had thrown objects ranging from coins and plastic bottles to horse manure, full drinks cans and glass bottles at the MFE and EDL marchers. On 28th April, when UAF did not turn up, some of the EDL activists turned over a Socialist Worker Party Stall and assaulted the two men attending the stall.
- 91 Right- and left-wing activists knocking over one another's stalls has been a staple of street politics for several decades. See for example Pearce (2013, 54–55) for an account of such activities in the 1970s.
- 92 Caroline Quinn, Leeds University, at the time of my fieldwork, and later also Hilary Pilkington, Manchester University.
- 93 The only exceptions to this were some of the people who had come to the EDL from traditional far right groups, and who by and large showed far less admiration or enthusiasm for the EDL leaders, and two of the younger activists who were both very shy and tended not to speak with more senior activists unless they were introduced to them by other activists whom they already knew.
- 94 Vigilante groups claiming to that they are acting to impose the Sharia, see for example 'Muslim "vigilantes" confront Londoners in name of Islam', *The Telegraph*, 17th January 2013, [www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/law-and-order/9808539/Muslim-vigilantes-confront-Londoners-in-name-of-Islam.html](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/law-and-order/9808539/Muslim-vigilantes-confront-Londoners-in-name-of-Islam.html)
- 95 Harris and colleagues (Harris et al. Macklin 2015) make a similar point about Luton.
- 96 I prefer the term 'anti-Muslim' to 'Islamophobic' because it is more consistent with the language that I would use to talk about mobilisations organised against other groups, that is, I would talk about anti-immigrant protests, anti-semitic protests, anti-Roma protests or more generally anti-minority protests. Using the term 'Islamophobic activism' would also, I believe, hint at a pathologisation of activists (phobias are irrational fears) that would be contrary to my aims in writing this book: I broadly agree with Bowen's (2005) assertion that the term Islamophobia is more 'polemical' than it is analytical (cited in Zúquete 2008, 323).
- 97 It is important to acknowledge that for some of the activists I knew their focus was very much on 'militant Islam' rather than on Muslims more generally. However, I believe that such activists represented a relatively small proportion of the activist community. It was common during demonstrations, meetings and online conversations to find commentaries about 'muzzies' and 'muzzrats'.
- 98 Definitional issues are discussed at length by Copsey (2010), Jackson (2011), Kas-simeris and Jackson (2015), Pilkington (2014), Pupcenoks and McCabe (2013) and Richards (2013b).

99 As Eatwell (2004, 14) has argued, at best terms such as ‘far right’ and ‘extreme right’ comprise ‘a convenient but flawed shorthand’.

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## Conclusions

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