# Why even misleading identity claims matter: The evolution of the English Defence League

Busher, J

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## Abstract

*When activists in radical, far or extreme right groups claim identities that set them apart from such analytical categories, they are usually given short shrift by commentators and academics, a function of the presumed strategic nature of such claims and the evidential inaccuracies that scrutiny of such claims often reveals. Such responses help ensure critical readings of these groups. However, they also risk overlooking the fact that, even where such identifications appear misleading, they may still be causally significant, shaping the group's evolution in important ways. I develop this argument using the case of the English Defence League, a group whose activists have tended to claim they are a 'single issue group' protesting only about the supposed threats of 'Islamification'. I demonstrate how their enactment of this identity, while uneven and erratic, shaped the emergent movement culture, tactical repertoires, intra-movement relations and, ultimately, the ebb and flow of movement viability.*

## Introduction

When I started attending English Defence League (EDL) events, I made the same 'mistake' several times.[1] Not surprisingly, the activists I met wanted to know who I was and what my research was about – Who did I work for? Was I a journalist? Was this another 'lefty hatchet job'? In response I would explain that I was an academic with an interest in political movements and that my project was about how, in spite of public opposition and hostile media coverage, the EDL had sustained itself for as long as it had. This way of presenting myself seemed to work: during a year and a half attending EDL events there were only two instances in which activists chose not to speak with me. Several of the people I had this conversation with did pick me up on one point, however. They would tell me, 'that's ok, but we're not a *political* movement, we're a *single issue street movement/protest group*' (my paraphrasing, based on field-notes), before going on to tell me about their 'single issue', usually presented in terms of the 'Islamification'

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[1] After the first two incidents, both during my first demonstration observation, I made this 'mistake' intentionally on several subsequent occasions as a form of ethnographic hypothesis testing.

or 'Islamisation'[2] of what they considered their particular bit of the world[3] and the threat this posed to the way of life of 'ordinary English people'.[4]

The tendency within the academic literature on radical, far or extreme right groups is to approach such identity claims as if they were fairly straightforward truth claims i.e. the questions put front and centre are about whether such identities are claimed in good faith and the extent to which 'we' – academics, commentators, policy-makers, the public – should accept them as descriptors of the groups in question. In most cases, the conclusion is that we ought to be sceptical, even suspicious, of these self-ascribed identities (e.g. Allen, 2011; Garland and Treadwell, 2010; Goodwin et al., 2016; Jackson, 2011; Kassimeris and Jackson, 2015).

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[2] I use 'Islamification' in general as this was the term more frequently used by the activists I knew.

[3] The activists spoke variably about England, Britain and 'the West'.

[4] The phrase most often used by the activists I knew to describe the wider population they identified with, although some also sometimes used class-based identities (see Garland and Treadwell, 2012; Winlow et al., 2017).

In the case of the type of claims made by EDL activists to be a 'single issue group', scholars usually raise two concerns. First, given that such identities are used strategically by activists to distance themselves from more extreme right groups and reputationally toxic labels such as 'racist', 'fascist' and 'Nazi', it is possible that such identity claims are not being made in good faith (Garland and Treadwell, 2010; Jackson, 2011; Mudde, 2000). Second, the concept of single issue groups or parties is itself problematic because it risks gross oversimplification of the issue frames around which such groups mobilise and the causal and motivational pathways through which they generate support (Mudde, 1999). In the case of the EDL, for example, while its activists have often claimed to be a single issue group protesting only about the supposed threats of Islamification, several studies have found that participation in EDL activism (Bartlett and Littler, 2011; Busher, 2015; Garland and Treadwell, 2012; Pai, 2016; Pilkington, 2016; Treadwell and Garland, 2011; Winlow et al., 2017) and sympathy for groups such as the EDL (Goodwin et al., 2016; Pai, 2016; Thomas et al., 2017) is usually grounded in a wider set of grievances, frustrations and anxieties associated with perceptions that 'ordinary English people' are suffering ever greater political and cultural marginalisation. Indeed, survey evidence indicates EDL activists are often at least, if not more, concerned about other issues including immigration and a lack of jobs, as they are

about the 'single issue' around which they are supposedly mobilising (Bartlett and Littler, 2011).

Such analyses have helped develop, articulate and sustain a critical reading of radical, far and extreme right politics – something particularly important at a time when, by adopting new forms and mobilising around new issue frames, some such movements have gained significant traction within 'mainstream' political arenas (Bruter and Harrison, 2011; Minkenberg, 2013). They have also inhibited the adoption of overly simplistic accounts of how such groups build support e.g. by making clear that the EDL is not simply a product of current anti-Muslim sentiment (especially Goodwin et al., 2016; Winlow et al., 2017).

They do however risk overlooking a basic but important point: the wider literature on collective identities and social movements (e.g. Hunt and Benford, 2004; Jensen, 1995; Melucci, 1995; Polletta and Jasper, 2001) indicates that regardless of whether *we* consider it *objectively* accurate to describe a group such as the EDL as a 'single issue group', the fact activists identify in this way may nonetheless have significant implications in terms of the group's tactical and ideological evolution and intra-group dynamics, and in terms of individuals' journeys through such

groups. As such, while it is important to question whether such identity claims provide us with an accurate picture of these groups, there are also other questions that we could and should be asking e.g. How are these collective identities constructed and performed within the activist community, by whom, how consistently and under what circumstances? How and to what extent has the performance of these collective identities shaped the evolution of the group(s) in terms of its ideology, tactical repertoire, alliances and intra-group dynamics? What has happened when (some) activists' have challenged this collective identity?

In this article I demonstrate how paying greater attention to such questions can help us better understand how radical, far or extreme right groups function and evolve. I do this by tracing how EDL activists' identification as a 'single issue group' protesting against the 'Islamification' of their country shaped the evolution of the EDL and the UK's contemporary anti-minority protest scene at micro-, meso- and macro-levels. In other words, I trace how such identifications shaped individual journeys through activism, the emergent movement culture and, more broadly, the 'ebb and flow' of the EDL's 'organisational viability'.[5] The aim of doing so is not to

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[5] A term borrowed from Zald and Ash Garner (1987: 123)

argue that we should simply accept activists' self-ascribed identities as descriptors of their group, or that the EDL is 'best' understood as a single issue group, but to argue that such identifications are important 'social facts' (Durkheim, 2013[1895]) and that by treating them as such – i.e. by examining their possible causal significance for other phenomena – we can enhance our ability to understand and explain the trajectory of radical, far and extreme right politics.

This article is grounded in data generated during sixteen months of overt ethnographic research undertaken with EDL activists in and around London during 2011-12. This comprised observation at demonstrations, meetings, memorial events, charity fundraisers, court cases and social events throughout this period; detailed activist life history interviews with 18 individuals; and observation of public and private social media conversations during and beyond the period of research. Frequent contact with several of the activists continued until the autumn of 2013, and occasional email, telephone or social media contact continues with some activists at the time of writing. Permission to undertake observation was sought from local gatekeepers within the organisation and the purpose of the research explained on first contact with all members of the group as far as was possible within the context of often chaotic protest events. Informed written

consent was provided for all formal interviews. The nature of the research – an ethnography centred on a small part of a national movement – meant it had a fairly narrow geographic focus. Ethnographies in other parts of the country (Pilkington, 2016; Quinn, 2015; Winlow et al., 2017) provide valuable points of comparison.

The next section provides an overview of the EDL and the wider anti-Muslim[6] protest scene since the group's emergence in 2009. After that, I set out the theoretical foundations of the argument developed in this article before discussing a) how EDL organisers and grassroots activists enacted their single-issue-protest-group identity and b) the implications of the enactment of this for the evolution of the EDL.

## An overview of the EDL and the UK's anti-Muslim protest scene, 2009-2016

The EDL came to prominence in the summer of 2009 with a series of street protests, several of which were characterised by significant public disorder,

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[6] Pilkington (2016) prefers 'anti-Islam'.

including clashes between EDL activists and an assortment of anti-fascist/racist campaigners and local youths, mainly from minority ethnic communities (Blake, 2011; Copsey, 2010). The group initially drew much of its support from established football violence networks (Copsey, 2010) or from among those who had 'retired' from football violence (Busher, 2015: 41). It soon attracted support from other constituencies, however, including the established extreme right and people already engaged with the so-called counter-jihad movement (see Mulhall and Lowles, 2015), as well as a significant number of people who had not been involved with any of these protest or football scenes but found themselves drawn to the EDL, usually through a combination of sympathy for the cause, personal contacts and the allure of a rambunctious day out (Busher, 2015: 38-73; Copsey, 2010; Meadowcroft and Morrow, 2016; Pilkington, 2016). By the end of 2009 and for much of 2010 and 2011 the group was regularly able to muster in excess of 1,000 supporters for demonstrations around the country; events that often cost local authorities and the police hundreds of thousands of pounds to manage (Allchorn, 2016). Bartlett and Littler (2011) estimate that, as of mid-2011, as many as 25,000 people had participated in an EDL demonstration. The EDL also built a substantial online following, with Facebook followers alone exceeding 100,000 at several points.

The EDL has operated through a loose network of local divisions, most with their own Facebook page. There have in addition been youth divisions, a women's division and 'special interest' divisions such as an 'LGBT division', a 'Jewish division' and a division for 'persecuted Christians', among others. As local divisions proliferated, regional coordinators were introduced to provide organisational structure, but these structures remained 'loose and chaotic' (Copsey, 2010: 6; see also Robinson, 2015). It is common, for example, to find uncertainty among activists about who their regional organiser is, or even which region their division belongs to (Pilkington, 2016: 37-59). External (movement) and internal (divisional) boundaries have also tended to be highly porous, with people able to join and leave divisions and the movement with relative ease (Busher, 2015: 45-6; Pilkington, 2016: 60-91), something not in keeping with conventional extreme right movements (Bjørgo, 1998; Wasmund, 1986)

Until October 2013, the national structures centred on Luton, a town about half an hour by train north of London. The town had been the scene of a series of demonstrations in early 2009 that generated the initial momentum for the formation of the group (Copsey, 2010). The Luton-based national leadership quickly became the main focus of media attention, with a BBC documentary,

*Young, British and Angry*, initially turning Kevin Carroll into the *de facto* face of the EDL. The media spotlight subsequently shifted onto his cousin, Tommy Robinson (aka Stephen Lennon), a high-energy, fast-talking, all-action character whose combination of swagger, self-deprecation and derring-do helped make him a popular figurehead within the movement. However, the local divisions operated with considerable autonomy, identifying local issues around which to mobilise and in some cases developing quite distinct local organisational cultures – something that would eventually contribute to the fragmentation of the movement (Busher, 2015: 123-56).

From the outset, EDL activists found themselves embroiled in a protracted 'framing contest' (Ryan, 1991) with their critics. Anti-fascists, media commentators and academics alike usually described the EDL as a 'far right', 'extreme right' or 'racist' group: albeit opinions differed about the degree of organisational and ideological continuity between the EDL and the established extreme right (Copsey, 2010; Jackson, 2011; Kassimeris and Jackson, 2015). In response, EDL activists pointed out that there were EDL activists from black and minority ethnic backgrounds; that there were banners on EDL demonstrations with slogans such as 'black and white unite against Islamic extremism'; that speakers at EDL

demonstrations repeatedly denounced established extreme right groups; and that EDL organisers had even published a video of themselves burning a swastika flag (Garland and Treadwell, 2010). They argued that it didn't make sense to call them *race*-ist because 'Islam is not a race' (Busher, 2015: 100; Pilkington, 2016: 106-7). The extent to which such arguments gained credence beyond EDL activists and a small coterie of supporters is difficult to gauge (Thomas et al., 2017; YouGov/Extremis, 2012). What is important in the context of this article however is that at least some activists were persuaded by their own arguments and did not identify, even in private, as racist or extreme right (Busher, 2015: 97-122; Pilkington, 2016: 92-124; Winlow et al., 2017: 75-108).

The EDL began to lose momentum in 2011 as intra-movement friction came to the surface. A full discussion of this friction goes beyond the scope of this article; suffice to say that as well as ideological tensions, there were regional rivalries, tactical disagreements, a resurgence of old football and sectarian enmities, and a proliferation of personal squabbles and resentments (Busher, 2015: 123-56; Lowles, 2012). Groups that had largely been allies of the EDL, such as Casuals United and March for England, began to reassert their differences, and factions crystallised into splinter groups such as the North-West Infidels, North-East

Infidels, South-East Alliance and Combined Ex-Forces. This resulted in a fragmented scene, characterised by smaller demonstrations and seemingly endless recriminations and in-fighting, often played out on social media to the undisguised glee of their opponents. There was a brief resurgence of the group's fortunes during the summer of 2013, following the murder of Fusilier Lee Rigby by two Islamist extremists in Woolwich, London (Pilkington, 2016: 37-59; Innes et al., 2016). This was however short-lived. In October of that year Robinson and Carrol resigned from the EDL, a move they claimed was motivated partly by concerns that the EDL was being taken over by extreme right elements (Gover, 2013).

This wave of anti-minority activism did not peter out altogether, however. The EDL and various cognate groups continue to organise demonstrations, albeit smaller ones, as well as a range of other protest activities, such as Britain First's 'Christian Patrols' (Allen, 2014). There have been indications of significant tactical and ideological radicalisation of splinter groups such as the North-West Infidels and South-East Alliance, some of whose activists have undertaken serious physical assaults on opponents, collaborated with the extreme-right National Front (NF) and peppered their Facebook pages with references to the 'fourteen words' of white supremacism. Meanwhile, other activists from the EDL have turned their energies

to campaigning around issues such as 'Brexit' (Archibald, 2016), various veterans causes, or forging alliances with the German-based group PEGIDA (Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the Occident, initials in German) (Goldberg, 2016).

## The emergent nature of movement cultures and the power of collective identity

The discussion and arguments developed in this article are grounded in three basic theoretical ideas that have been amply demonstrated in the literature on social movements and contentious politics. First, movement cultures – i.e. their tactical repertoires and tastes (Jasper, 2007; Tilly, 2008), issue frames (Benford and Snow, 2000), collective identities (Hunt and Benford, 2004; Polletta and Jasper, 2001), emotional repertoires and 'rhythms' (Summers-Effler, 2010), normative orders (Busher and Morrison, 2016), aesthetics (Miller-Idriss, 2014), and even activists' interpretation of their own motives (Snow et al., 1980; Wright Mills, 1940) – are emergent. Movement cultures, like the cultures of other social groups or collectives (see Fine, 2010; Goffman, 1967), can change over time as they are affirmed, negotiated, challenged and policed through activists' interactions with one another

and with their various opponents and allies, obstacles and opportunities (Blee, 2012; Jasper, 2007).

Second, changes in one element of the movement culture entail adjustments in other elements of the movement culture (Jasper, 2007: 181-266). If, for example, activists' interpretation of 'the problem' expands e.g. instead of seeing their putative problems as being caused by the ineptitude or corruption of local politicians they begin to see them as the product of a larger coordinated plot to alter society, it is likely that the targeting of their actions will change to reflect this, and new strategies of action may be required. This may lead activists to rethink what comprises a legitimate strategy of action, prompting further reflection on and reframing of 'who is to blame', and so forth (Blee, 2012: 81-108).

Third, emergent movement cultures, including the stories that activists tell themselves about who they are and what they represent, shape the practices, cognitions and emotions of movement participants, sometimes in dramatic ways (Jasper, 2007: 69-99; Swidler, 1995). Crudely put, activism changes people, and the specific nature of these changes depends on the characteristics of the group culture in which they are participants.

In the remainder of this article I demonstrate how these basic theoretical propositions are borne out in the case of the EDL. In doing so I argue that, even where we consider activists' identity claims to be (even wilfully) misleading, it is important to recognise that they can still be causally significant i.e. they can have a bearing on how the group evolves and on individual journeys through activism.

## The enactment of activists' 'single issue protest group' identity

All the activists I met were aware of the potential strategic benefits of identifying as a 'single issue protest group'. They believed that defining themselves in this way differentiated them organisationally and ideologically from established extreme right political parties such as the British National Party (BNP) and the NF, and believed, or at least hoped, that the nature of their 'single issue' would insulate them from accusations of racism, at least in the minds of some of the general public. They were also aware that their claims to be 'not political' played on an anti-politics zeitgeist that extends well beyond the social and political fringe (see Hay, 2007). What is important in the context of this article however is not the

motivation for, or perceived benefits of, such identifications, but whether and how they were enacted, in which contexts and under what conditions.

EDL activism has taken place across a range of more or less public and managed spaces. These have included official street demonstrations of varying size, unofficial or 'flash' demonstrations, petitions against mosques, leafleting campaigns, attempted boycotts of restaurants selling halal food, organisational social media pages, the personal social media pages of activists, memorials for symbolically significant events, and various charity fundraisers. The social spaces associated with each of these activities have been characterised by subtly different behavioural norms and social rules – a product of the fact that different activities have brought together slightly different configurations of actors, audiences, opponents, symbols and interests (Busher and Morrison, 2016).Yet activists' identification as part of a single issue protest group permeated the emergent behavioural norms and social rules of all of these spaces to a greater or lesser degree.

As might be expected given the anticipated strategic importance of presenting themselves as a single issue protest group, the enactment of this identity was particularly evident in more public facing and managed spaces of activism, such as

marches and official social media pages. In the case of marches and demonstrations it would begin during the build-up, as national and regional leaders justified the particular march in terms that clearly emphasised the group's supposed single issue focus e.g. it was in response to plans for a new 'mega-mosque', to highlight the activities of 'Muslim grooming gangs', challenge the supposedly unfettered activities of 'extremist preachers' etc. This identity enactment would then continue during the event. The vast majority of speeches centred on the issue of Islamification, albeit there were sometimes references to intersecting themes including the dangers of 'political correctness' and the supposedly venal politics of 'the left'; activists' placards usually bore slogans relating specifically to Islam and Muslims; and common chants such as '10 Muslim bombers'[7] and 'Allah is a paedo' also reflected this focus of attention. There was often racist shouting from some activists and occasional displays of extreme right symbols in the form of pin-badges, insignia on clothing, tattoos and very occasionally a straight-arm salute. However, in most instances such 'breaches' (Garfinkel, 1967) of the performance of their group identity were policed by event stewards who would intervene to curtail such actions (Busher, 2013).

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[7] Sung to the tune of 10 Green Bottles

It is a similar story with the EDL's website and official social media pages. When the EDL first posted a full mission statement early in 2011, they did so under the headline 'Peacefully protesting Militant Islam', and each of their five primary points ('Human Rights', 'Democracy and the Rule of Law', 'Public Education', 'Respecting Tradition' and 'International Outlook') were articulated with reference to the supposed threat of the global diffusion of 'militant Islam' and 'sharia'. Meanwhile, administrators on the group's online forums sought to inculcate a culture that reflected the single-issue-group identity. Administrators on local and regional Facebook pages in London and the Southeast spent several hours each week moderating divisional Facebook walls, promoting discussion of 'EDL issues' and deleting comments they deemed inappropriate. As one London organiser recalled,

> I'd get up in the morning and I'd man the Facebook wall for the day. I'd search around for EDL-related stories and if you ever looked at the London page it was fairly sharp and it was just EDL stuff, I mean nothing else, and I tried to find educational pieces for people: things that, you know, explain to you about different

kinds of Islam, the different Islamic sects and explained about Muslims Against

Crusades [a now proscribed group led by Anjem Choudary]. (Andy)[8]

After Robinson and Carroll left the EDL there were indications that the group's issue frame might broaden. In February 2014 the EDL announced that their mission statement would be adjusted to include reference to 'mass immigration', and on 19th July 2014 an EDL demonstration in Hexthorpe, South Yorkshire, was organised around the theme of Roma immigration. As of the summer of 2016, however, the demonstration in Hexthorpe remains an outlier and, while the EDL mission statement has been adjusted to include a position on immigration (Pilkington, 2016: 124), 'the struggle against global Islamification' continues to be foregrounded in these official and public spaces.

More importantly for the purposes of this article, activists' identification as a single issue group also permeated into the 'backstage' (Mudde, 2000; Jackson, 2011) spaces of the group – those spaces where activists were less exposed to, or thought they were less exposed to, the scrutiny of the public, the media and their

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[8] All names used are pseudonyms, except for those referring to people in leadership positions.

opponents. During private meetings, for example, activists sometimes used language and expressed opinions they were usually reluctant to express in more public spaces – such as 'off the record' comments about 'being fed up with all the fucking immigrants',[9] comments about how they would like the EDL to start mobilising around other issues, including 'mass immigration' and 'anti-white racism', and more frequent use of terms such as 'Pakis'. Yet the enactment of their single-issue-protest-group identity did not dissolve altogether. At the meetings I attended, activists making speeches or leading discussions consistently reiterated the focus on Islam, or even 'militant Islam', and during activists' conversations about their cause (i.e. when not engaged in movement gossip, discussions about current affairs or football, or revelling in tales of previous events) the focus of attention remained largely on topics such as new mosques being built in their area, the latest activities of Muslims Against Crusades, and stories of their own recent confrontations with Muslims. The main exception to this were references to left-wing or anti-racist groups, but these were conceived of as part of the 'single issue' since the 'liberal left' was deemed culpable for the government's supposed failure to challenge Islamification. Similarly, when activists made reference to sources other

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[9] Fieldnotes from a regional EDL meeting, London, 26th February 2012.

than mainstream news media these were almost invariably websites, blogs or other publications associated with the counter-jihad movement. References to publications associated with established extreme right groups were conspicuous by their absence. In the spring and summer of 2011 regional organisers in London were even planning to develop training about Islam for divisional leaders, and two members of the leadership team were designated to advise activists on whether or not specific Islamic groups should be considered 'extremist', and therefore warranting the EDL's attention.

Even during informal conversations e.g. on the way to and from demonstrations, during social events or charity fundraisers, there was evidence that activists had internalised the single-issue-group identity and engaged in forms of self-policing. Once they hit their rhetorical stride, it was common for activists to reach beyond complaints ostensibly focused on Islam and Muslims to a more general lament that ranged across themes including immigration, overcrowded social housing, benefit fraud and, in the months after the English riots of August 2011, the supposed links between 'black culture' and a decline in law and order. They would however repeatedly return to the core EDL themes, making clear that where they had strayed from those themes they were 'just my opinions'. This was even the case

among activists whose personal concerns were not aligned with the official EDL position. For example Geoff, a former BNP and NF activist, regularly expressed frustration at the relatively narrow issue frame adopted by the EDL and occasionally when drunk after a march would surreptitiously perform a Nazi salute, but always accompanied such comments or actions with an acknowledgement that his views were not representative of the EDL or of most of his co-activists.

Where breaches of these emergent group norms took place, they usually incurred some form of sanction (see also Pilkington, 2016: 97-99). In most cases these were relatively subtle, especially when breaches happened in private spaces (e.g. divisional meetings or informal conversations) or when they comprised a fairly minor infraction. This could be in the form of 'a quiet word'. Phil, one of the younger and more vocal activists in the London area, remembered how on one occasion after he had made overtly racist comments during a social event one of the older activists 'took me to one side' to speak to him about his views – 'just because you've had one bad experience it don't mean like you should go running about and hating all black people'. Other forms of mild sanction could simply be that their comments received a more lukewarm or ambivalent response from their co-activists than, say, comments more specifically about Islam and Muslims – e.g. less

clearly expressed verbal support from co-activists, co-activists swiftly moving on to another topic, or an awkward half agreement from the group.

Where breaches were more public or considered more serious, such as racist chanting on demonstrations or the performance of straight-arm salutes, sanctions could be more forceful, ranging from a public 'bollocking' (Pilkington, 2016: 107), to expulsion from the movement, physical intimidation or even violence. For example, the banning of Bill Baker, leader of the English Nationalist Alliance and a prominent figure in the London area until early 2011, from all EDL events, was due at least partly to a perception that comments he made during a televised debate had 'racist connotations'.[10]  Similarly, after a photograph emerged of an individual performing a Nazi salute during an EDL march in London in October 2011, activists across the region expressed outrage and worked together to try to identify the individual and proscribe him from future events.

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[10] Recovered from 'The EDL and the JTF', *Gates of Vienna*, 1st March 2010,

http://gatesofvienna.blogspot.co.uk/2011/03/edl-and-jtf.html. (Accessed 1 March, 2017)

In sum, while there are good reasons to be sceptical about the idea that the EDL is a single issue group protesting only about the supposed threats of Islamification, once we get up close to the practices that constitute EDL activism we can see that this aspect of activists' collective identity has nonetheless had a significant bearing on the group's emergent culture, shaping behavioural norms and expectations across most, if not all, spaces in which EDL activism took place.

## Implications for the evolution of anti-minority protest

The emergent behavioural norms and expectations described above have had a number of tangible implications for the evolution of the EDL and anti-minority protest in the UK.

### *Patterns of recruitment*

One of the most obvious implications concerns patterns of recruitment, particularly during the initial period of movement growth. While the EDL has attracted known extreme right activists, it was also initially relatively successful in attracting people who did not identify with the extreme right (Bartlett and Littler, 2011), including

some who identified as being explicitly opposed to such groups (Busher, 2015: 38-74; Pai, 2016). Indeed, when the EDL was at its peak, individuals identifying with or who had long associations with the established extreme right comprised a minority of the group's supporters (Busher, 2015; Bartlett and Littler, 2011; Pilkington, 2016).

The ability of the EDL to attract people who did not identify with the extreme right was fundamental to the group's initial momentum (Copsey, 2010), which in turn served to attract further interest and support (Busher, 2015: 58-59). It also had a multiplier effect: the fact that prospective activists who did not identify with the extreme right tended to meet other people who identified in similar ways when they attended their first EDL events made it easier for them to engage with group. A recurring theme in interviews and informal conversations with activists who did not identify with the extreme right was that part of what persuaded them to join the EDL was meeting other EDL supporters who were 'ordinary English people' rather than the 'thugs and racists' they had heard about on the television.

The recruitment of people from beyond existing extreme right scenes is likely to have consequences that extend well beyond the duration of the EDL. Evidence

indicates that people who have already participated in social or political mobilisations are more likely to do so in the future than those who have not (Corrigall-Brown, 2012; McAdam, 1989). It is quite possible that the EDL has socialised a cohort of people into contentious politics who otherwise would have been unlikely to be involved with such activities (Lowles, 2012).

### *Activists' personal ideological trajectories*

As might be expected in a radical protest movement (Davies, 2008), most of the activists I encountered had a highly binary interpretation of the world, seeing themselves as engaged in a millennial struggle between good and evil – an existential fight for the future of their country and culture. Of importance for the argument of this article, however, their interpretation of this struggle usually had a quite specific ideological or discursive texture. Most activists rarely, and in some cases never, framed their cause in terms of biologically defined race, even during private conversations. Where activists did express more general anti-minority and anti-foreigner sentiments, Islam and Muslims were almost always identified as posing a particularly acute and intractable threat. The exceptions to this were usually among activists who had come to the EDL via established extreme right

groups, or activists who identified primarily with other factions/organisations (see also Pilkington, 2016).

Some activists even claimed that involvement in the EDL had helped them move away from the extreme right and associated racist attitudes and dispositions (see also Pilkington, 2016: 107). Phil, for example, told me,

> I wasn't completely racist before I started, but I had a lot more right-wing views . . . But then once I started with the EDL, I turned that all around and to this day I've got black friends that I talk to in work and get on with and have a laugh with, and I've actually completely turned things around and now I'm just standing against one thing, and that's the one thing that we see as a problem. (Phil)

The idea of somebody turning away from racism by joining a group such as the EDL might seem preposterous to some people. Yet it is quite possible to see how Phil could interpret his own ideological journey in this way. Furthermore, research on the intersection of protest narratives, collective identities and emotions in other movements (e.g. Blee, 2012: 81-108; Goodwin et al., 2001) supports the idea that activists' exposure to and participation in the intensive circulation and

consumption of information focused heavily on the supposed threat of Islamification might, in some cases, have resulted in them becoming increasingly entrained, cognitively and emotionally, with this specific issue. In other words, some EDL activists may have experienced, at least temporarily, a shift in the object of their fear, anger and hostility from a more general focus on perceived non-British/English/Western Others to a more specific and articulated focus on Muslims. Interestingly, as the EDL fragmented, the Facebook pages of some of the activists I had known, particularly those who became aligned with the South-East Alliance, increasingly featured content from extreme right groups as well as white power symbols and slogans.

### *Movement leadership*

A third area in which activists' single-issue-group identity had clear implications was the distribution of leadership positions.

Part of the attraction of EDL activism was a sense that everybody could become a somebody within this scene (Busher, 2015). The activists I met acquired status in a number of ways: a reputation for being brave and loyal; their proximity to national

leaders; or a reputation for being well-informed about Islam. What stands out however is that leadership positions were largely occupied by activists who subscribed to and promoted the idea that the EDL was a single issue protest group. At the national level, Robinson and Carroll, and subsequently Tim Ablitt and Steve Eddowes,[11] have broadly sustained this position, sometimes in the face of opposition from within the movement.

To some extent this has also been the case at the local and regional levels, particularly within the divisions most closely aligned with the national leadership, as was the case in London. Here, between 2011 and 2013, all of the local or regional organisers were able, and appeared comfortable, to articulate the view that the EDL was focused only on 'militant Islam' and Islamification, and were willing to challenge the sometimes overtly racist positions of some co-activists.[12]

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[11] Chairs of the leadership committee after Robinson and Carroll resigned.

[12] Although see Pilkington's (2016: 97-9) discussion of some activists' frustrations that such disciplining was not particularly systematic or effective.

The collective enactment of activists' single-issue-group identity helped consolidate these individuals as leaders because, to borrow from Goffman (1967), they were the main winners from the deference rules inscribed in the group's emergent culture. They were the individuals who were given the microphone during demonstrations, the floor during meetings, and whose observations and comments received the most consistently positive feedback from co-activists. By contrast, activists who strayed too far from the theme of Islamification, particularly during public events, were rarely invited to speak publicly or at meetings again, thereby inhibiting their chances of coming to be recognised as movement leaders.

A similar dynamic took place within the movement nationally. Robinson and Carroll by and large favoured local and regional organisers who adopted a similar position to themselves, and marginalised those[13] who undermined the single-issue-group identity by, for example, forming or advocating alliances with established extreme right groups or adopting slogans and symbols derived from conventional

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[13] Such as John 'Snowy' Shaw, who became a leading figure within the Infidels, and later Paul Pitt, who established the South-East Alliance.

extreme right positions – an approach that exacerbated regional rivalries and contributed to the splits that characterised the EDL from 2011 onwards.

### *Action repertoire and alliances*

This introduces a fourth area where activists' single-issue-group identity had implications: the EDL's action repertoire – e.g. the consistent targeting of protest activities at objects and issues with clear symbolic linkages to the themes of Islam and Islamification, and non-adoption of electoral campaigning – and decisions about the alliances that they did, or did not, make. An ill-fated attempt by Robinson and Carroll to create an alliance with the British Freedom Party (BFP), a very small party that emerged out of a split from the BNP in 2010, provides a good example.

The proposal to forge this alliance was made in the autumn of 2011, as support for street demonstrations waned and the disputes between the EDL leadership and the Infidels sapped movement morale. The response from grassroots activists was however far from positive, with all but a handful expressing reticence or even outright opposition to the move. The single-issue-protest-group identity was

integral to this opposition. First, some activists expressed concern that an alliance with the BFP would make it harder for them to persuade the public that the EDL was not a extreme right group because, as one activist succinctly put it, 'BFP is too similar to BNP' (Susan). Second, activists argued that they had chosen to join a street movement, not a political party. They saw themselves as 'the feet on the street' (Susan), 'the ones who actually get the job done' (Bev), and several had been attracted to the EDL precisely because the group was 'getting out and actually doing something'.[14] Linking to a political party just did not fit with this sense of who they were. Meanwhile, several activists who did support parties such as the BNP expressed concern that this would 'split the nationalist vote'.

## *Movement cohesion and its limitations*

Finally, activists' identification as a single issue group also played an important role in forging and fraying movement cohesion. Since social movements usually comprise 'an uneasy coalition between groups favouring different tactics, often with slightly different moral sensibilities [which] have little to do with each other,

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[14] A common theme in interviews with activists regardless of the route they had taken into EDL activism

even dislike each other' (Jasper, 2007: 229), one of the main challenges for any nascent movement is to develop and sustain a sense of collective identity and a shared interpretation of 'what the problem is' (Blee, 2012; Melucci, 1995).

The EDL certainly had its share of seemingly unlikely alliances. Long-term football hooligans marched alongside people waving gay pride flags, and people who had until recently been part of the extreme right scene stood next to people holding Israel flags. Furthermore, while most activists would, when asked directly, provide a similar initial explanation of what they were protesting about – the threat of Islamification and the loss of the way of life of 'ordinary English people' – the EDL in fact provided a home for people with a range of different interests and ideological positions (Taylor, 2010). There were activists who still identified with groups such as the BNP and NF, but also activists who identified as anti-racists; there were activists who linked their cause to a Christian identity, and others who were passionate atheists; there were activists who interpreted their struggle in parochial national terms, and others who interpreted their struggle as a global struggle between Islam and the West; and while some activists' anti-Muslim positions elided with wider anti-minority positions, including anti-Semitism,

others enthusiastically embraced elements of Zionism (Busher, 2015; Pilkington, 2016).

Activists' single-issue-group identity, and their enactment of it, played an important role in achieving a basic level of group cohesion in at least two ways.[15] First, the single-issue-group identity neutralised, at least temporarily, some of the more obvious ideological tensions by ensuring activists only had to identify a very limited area of ideological common ground. Second, it enabled activists of different ideological persuasions to undertake important forms of personal identity management. EDL activists who were supportive of extreme right political parties, such as Geoff, told themselves that the EDL was campaigning about a worthwhile, if overly narrow, cause, and that since the EDL was just a protest group it was not in direct competition with the political parties with which they were affiliated. Indeed, some saw it as a useful recruiting ground for 'proper extreme right-wing

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[15] Also important were the powerful and specific bonds of solidarity produced through shared participation in collective action (Busher, 2015; Pilkington, 2016) and the cultivation of both anti-elite enmity and shared identification as part of an increasingly ignored working class (a cross-cutting theme in the literature, but see especially Pilkington, 2016: 154-76; Winlow et al., 2017)

groups'.[16] Meanwhile, those who did not identify with the extreme right were able to justify marching alongside known extreme right activists on the grounds that they were only in agreement on this particular issue. Some even claimed that they were helping to undermine the extreme right by providing an opportunity for people who might otherwise have joined such groups to express 'legitimate' grievances and patriotic sentiments. Even as the EDL began to fall apart, this sense of a common cause acted as a break on the group's fragmentation, with activists from opposing factions or those who had drifted away occasionally coming together again around events that brought this cause into focus – as happened briefly after the killing of Lee Rigby.

Yet while the single-issue-group identity had facilitated group cohesion, it also placed limits on the extent to which the EDL could adapt to and accommodate the evolving interests of its activists. In any movement, activists' interpretive frames are likely to shift over time (Benford, 1997). The EDL was no exception. As some activists developed new interests, and others rekindled old interests, there were growing calls from parts of the activist community to mobilise around a wider set of

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[16] A phrase used by Tim, a long-term activist within the NF and Combat 18, among others.

issues, including 'mass immigration' and 'anti-white racism', and for the EDL to work more closely with other groups, some of which were part of, or were openly collaborating with, the established extreme right. These calls were largely resisted, or only partially accommodated, as the EDL leadership and a significant proportion of grassroots activists continued to frame themselves essentially as a single issue group and disassociate with the extreme right. As might be expected, this became a source of frustration among activists who did want to expand the focus of the EDL, some of whom joined up with other groups and breakaway factions, often generating recriminations and resentments as they did so.

## Conclusions

Most scholars of the radical, far or extreme right are committed to challenging such movements and mitigating their deleterious effects on society. It is not surprising therefore that analytical attention has been concentrated on developing critical readings of how activists in such groups define themselves. The argument made in this article is not that we should cease to pursue such critical readings, but that these should not come at the cost of overlooking how activists' claimed identities may, and often do, shape the trajectory of these groups. Even where we might

consider these claimed identities to be potentially misleading, they may still constitute an integral part of the emergent movement culture because, in the very act of activists asserting these identities, they become a social fact i.e. they become part of an emergent social structure or narrative that shapes activists' thoughts, behaviours, feelings and interactions (Jenson, 1995).

In the case of the EDL, it is clear that the idea that they *are* a single issue group protesting only about the threat of Islamification is problematic. Apart from obvious questions about whether such identity claims are made in good faith, there can be little doubt the EDL was not simply a product of hostility towards Islam or Muslims. The relative success of the group in generating and sustaining support also owed much to the way it worked on broader xenophobic attitudes and dispositions (Goodwin et al., 2016) and tapped deep feelings of social, and often class-based, marginalisation and enmity towards political elites (Pilkington 2016: 154-76; Winlow et al., 2017). Rather than a 'single issue group', we might be better thinking of the EDL as a 'lightning rod' for a range of different interests (Taylor, 2010), albeit these to some extent dovetailed through the prism of anti-Muslim or anti-Islam positions. Yet as described above, activists' single-issue-group identity nonetheless had a profound effect on the emergent movement culture and,

consequently, on the evolution of the EDL and the UK's anti-minority protest scene, affecting patterns of recruitment, movement leadership, alliances and intra-group relations, as well as influencing individuals' ideological trajectories and, ultimately, the ebb and flow of movement viability. While research to date has described the prominence of this identity within EDL activism (especially Busher, 2013; 2015; Pilkington 2016), this article has set out and theorised how such identities permeated almost all aspects of the group, shaping both its development and decline.

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