Two years ago on a rare, sunny afternoon in North East England, I headed towards a seaside town where I had been conducting research with young Bangladeshi Muslims. As this was a weekend I would normally be going there for a coastal walk or bike ride. Usually I would feel a sense of impending excitement at the thought of visiting the beach, feeling the sand between my toes and the sun upon my skin. Today though, things felt different. Make no mistake – there was a feeling in the air that things were different.

Odd as it may sound, I was travelling to meet up and congregate with a rabble of people I didn’t know. They were a patchwork group of Socialist Workers Party supporters, local councillors and residents protesting against the English Defence League (EDL) that were planning to march through the local area in the interior heartland where my research had been based. We expected trouble. The police had told the Muslim restaurant owners and shopkeepers to consider boarding up their establishments while the march took place and there was a sense of wariness around. The warm weather also meant the pubs were busy as people sat outside drinking and spilling out onto the street. As I hurried past the bars and pubs to the meeting point I averted my gaze from the groups of men hanging about. The North East has its fair share of shaven-headed blokes with bulked up biceps who enjoy a few pints. But my antennae were hyper-sensitive, pushing forward a single, undiluted thought – were they EDL?

Though I am no Einstein, like most ethnic minority people I am familiar with the following formula:

\[
\text{White masculinity} \times n \text{ (where n is unknown)} + \text{alcohol} + \text{EDL leanings} \Rightarrow \text{TROUBLE}
\]

\[
\text{Brown skin}
\]

As it turned out, aside from a brief skirmish I witnessed between a group of youthful Asian men looking for excitement and a few EDL supporters, there was little violence on the seaside that day. The police had deflated tensions by stopping the EDL from marching directly through the main South Asian area in town near where we were stood. Little did I know at the time that Hilary Pilkington,
the soon-to-be author of *Loud and proud*, was attending similar marches up and down the country, but on the other side of the *cordon sanitaire*. She was researching the EDL.

While accounts of those who have infiltrated the British far right can be found, the portrayal in popular books and undercover television documentaries tends to focus on the spectacular. Yet Pilkington reveals that much of the daily activity of many EDL members is relatively mundane. So what did Pilkington achieve in studying the EDL upfront and up close? In reading the book there is little doubt that *Loud and proud* gets beneath the skin of the EDL and conducts a full and thorough autopsy of what lies beneath. With surgical precision Pilkington slices away at many of the myths and assumptions that surround the organisation – who they are, what they stand for, how they are organised and their *raison d’être*. Representations of the EDL as homogeneous with regard to the composition of participants are laid bare. While the majority of members are male and unemployed they are not all ex-football hooligans and far right fascists. What Pilkington reveals is a far more complex picture of the movement that includes an LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) division, members who refute and challenge fascism, as well as a not-so-silent majority who feel disenfranchised by the numbing banality of contemporary British politics and the lack of meaningful debate on social polarisation.

A key contribution of the study is that it moves beyond media representations to investigate the people at the heart of EDL marches. Pilkington describes the EDL as a street-based new social movement that coalesces around a number of issues and popular concerns. She reveals how the movement is organised, financed, recruits and further seeks to disseminate its disquieting message. By probing behind the mask she draws out some fascinating biographies that help us understand the profile of supporters and works to flesh them out in meaningful and humane ways. Here we get to see them not simply as racist extremists but as whole people with families, jobs, mental health problems, stressful relationships and so forth. If we are to better understand contemporary forms of racism and religious intolerance, and offer meaningful strategies to tackle these, we need to know who these people are, what they think and why.

What makes Pilkington’s study unique is the sense of ‘being there’, delivered through the intimacy of her eloquent ethnographic writing. What is most impressive is the dedication Pilkington shows to the ethnographic method, travelling on early morning coaches to rallies, experiencing police regulation through ‘kettling’ practices, joining supporters for drinks and perhaps, unusually for a professorial academic, engaging with people ‘not like us’. As the testimonies reveal, many of the members are more like us than we might choose to imagine. Although it is rarely discussed in methodology textbooks, this type of work involves a great deal of stamina and an interest in people that cannot be feigned. It is impossible not to be impressed by the sheer willpower and intrepid nature of the author. Pilkington’s discussion on method and research ethics is fluently written and illuminating; it really conveys how research gets done. The study is seamlessly interwoven with first-hand experience of events, interviews, photographs and
field-notes. For anyone teaching research methods to students, the systematic approach to ethnography and the detailed reflections on the ethics and the issues thrown up will provide exemplary case study material.

Notwithstanding this enormous ethnographic labour, the book is likely to be controversial. This is not wholly because it is an ethnographic study that centres upon what is a largely vilified section of the population. It partly rests with the way in which Pilkington refrains from bestowing moral judgement on the participants she encounters, recognising the value of forming a rapport with them, and empathetically being conscious of the way in which similarities and difference underpin all human relationships. She chooses to allow participants to speak for themselves, granting them greater agency than many studies permit, even if some of what they say may strike readers as contradictory or unpalatable. At times this can be a difficult circle to square, which prompted me to enquire if Pilkington regards the ethnographer as dedicated to the description of culture, or as someone who is an agent in the making of that culture. The reality is that most in-depth research of this kind presents difficult ethical situations, unexpected alliances, oscillating attachments and partial acts of representation and (mis)recognition. To listen without prejudice is no easy thing to do.

Pilkington reveals how EDL members perceive themselves as victims of the state and harbour grievances towards law and justice, the allocation of public housing and shrinking employment opportunities. While none of this is new, it is interesting that the distribution of welfare benefits is of such concern given that most EDL supporters are themselves primary recipients of Britain’s benefit system. This does not stop them from weaving together narratives that allow them to self-present as victims, often at the expense of minorities who are viewed as structurally advantaged by the state. But how real are these testimonies, what purpose do they serve, for whom and why? Through the telling of these stories the privilege of whiteness is erased. In doing so the EDL can lay claim to whiteness as an embattled identity, that is constantly under attack and must be protected. This is not just a discursive strategy, but an affective disposition that is strongly felt and widely believed. Even the name, the English Defence League, suggests an identity under siege.

Like many far right social movements before them, the EDL repeatedly claim they are not racist. Indeed, Pilkington draws out instances where those giving Nazi salutes are criticised and points where colour-based racism and generic violence is roundly condemned. However, a focal point for the EDL is an obsession with what they perceive as the ‘Islamicisation of Britain’ and concerns that Muslims are ‘taking over’. Here EDL members invoke discourses of democracy, pointing to what they regard as the premodern patriarchal aspects of Islamic culture they claim subjugate women, or broader forms of territoriality concerning the building of mosques in a supposedly Christian country. When Muslims are discussed confusion reigns supreme – slippages are made between ‘extremists’ and ‘moderate’ Muslims, Islam, Asians and Pakistanis. More disconcerting though is that the views of the EDL are not hugely out of line with evidence found in recent polls and national population surveys that also reflect intolerance towards those of Muslim
faith. Maybe parts of the EDL are more like the general population than we would like to think? Moreover in believing I might be able to spot EDL protestors in pubs around the North East coastal town, I too was working on stereotypical assumptions. Indeed, much contemporary racism is often found hiding in the light.

In many ways Pilkington’s study gestures towards the strain of liberal democracy in Britain where people continue to feel removed and detached from formal politics. Recent times have seen a coalition government come to power that no one voted for and that was later superseded. In a period of political apathy the rise of alternative parties and movements is strikingly apparent. The bubbling popularity of the Scottish National Party in the 2015 elections, the rise of the United Kingdom Independence Party and the election of the overtly socialist Jeremy Corbyn as the new post-election Labour opposition leader have much to tell us about how the wider disenchantment felt by the British public towards mainstream politics. It is within the fault-lines of liberal democracy that grassroots movements such as the EDL have sprung up, feeding on public political anathema, disenfranchisement and a desire to do things differently. Interestingly, the majority of EDL supporters are wary of the movement becoming established as a formal political party, feeling it would risk watering down their message and dissolve the energy of street protest. There is little doubt that supporters enjoy demonstrations, the feeling of being part of a collective and the opportunity to share time with like-minded individuals. The desire to keep the EDL on the edges of the political arena and therefore away from power perhaps speaks to something that is more inexplicable, personal and cathartic. The act of being ‘loud and proud’ is about feeling, affect and emotion: a primal scream at the very core of British society that seeks to be heard. Pilkington is practised in the ethnographic art of listening and acts as an interlocutor who enables the primal elements of this scream to become intelligible.

* Loud and proud * is a terrific piece of scholarship that demonstrates a real commitment to the ethnographic method. It challenges many of the outward perceptions of the EDL, by listening to those who are at the heart of the movement. The writing is compelling throughout and the analysis is never overstated. The work is a real accomplishment, and like many of the best books, it will agitate and inspire in equal measure. Hilary Pilkington delivers what is ultimately a highly original, rigorously researched and thought-provoking account of the EDL. It is an unflinching ethnography of the EDL that is bold and humane in its approach.

Anoop Nayak