
'Loud and proud': piercing the politics of silencing

The response to inroads into the political system by right-wing populist movements has been to establish a *cordon sanitaire* around them in a 'moralization' of politics that denies social division and silences the multiplicity of voices that constitute politics (Mouffe, 2005: 120). Conducted as it is from a viewing point on the 'other' side of that *cordon*, this study explores this reframing of the political sphere in the moral register (2005: 5) through the concrete – and embodied – experience of it by EDL activists. In this chapter, that experience is shown to be one of a politics of silencing in which attempts to articulate grievances are met with accusations of racism and respondents learn to 'keep your mouth shut'. This constraint on political space compounds a wider disengagement from the formal political sphere and a denial of the 'political' nature of activism. Such disengagement, it is argued here, is not rooted in a traditional far right, anti-democratic ideology, however, but in an experientially based scepticism about the functioning of contemporary formal democracy that has much in common with a disavowal of politics among the population more broadly (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002: 157–58). That this is a radical variant of views found in wider society rather than 'a normal pathology unconnected to the mainstream' (Mudde, 2007: 297) is demonstrated through the absence (with rare exceptions) of anti-democratic alternative ideologies in respondents' narratives.

EDL activism provides a response to the politics of silencing beyond 'keeping your mouth shut'. In contrast to the formal political realm, this activism is experienced not as a site of meaningless debate but a space to 'tell it like it is'. It does not require compliant listening but allows respondents to stand 'loud and proud'. This understanding of activism constitutes a form of embodied agency that defies the 'social weightlessness' that the political (including the radical democratic political) might assume (McNay, 2014: 20). On the contrary, it is deeply socially constituted because it starts from the concrete experience of powerlessness and injustice (the removal of 'our issues' from the realm of the political) and addresses this exclusion and silencing through embodied practices of 'being seen' and 'being heard'. These practices, however, signal also a demand for recognition by, and on behalf of, sections of white working-class communities who feel their problems have been overlooked, their grievances dismissed as motivated by narrow-minded

prejudice and who, as a group, have been culturally marginalised and vilified (Kenny, 2012: 25–26). The chapter thus concludes by considering whether EDL activism constitutes a ‘potentially legitimate demand for “recognition”’ (2012: 32) or simply the loud proclamation of the wrong kind of pride.

The politics of silencing

Attempts by white working-class communities to articulate their worsening position, Kenny (2012: 25) argues, have been ignored or their grievances dismissed as the product of ethnically charged nationalism or narrow-minded prejudice (2012: 25). This politics of silencing is recognised by the EDL and referenced in its slogan ‘Not racist, not violent, just no longer silent’ (see Figure 4.1). It is kept in place through the legal and cultural circumscription of ‘legitimate’ political discourse – what constitutes ‘acceptable’ issues for discussion – and is socially and politically reproduced through the social distance between ‘politicians’ and ‘people like us’. In this section, the first of these dimensions is considered through activists’ experiences of the politics of silencing in their institutional interactions (with the police and the education system) and in the inculcation of a fear of being labelled ‘racist’. The second dimension is considered in the following section through discussion of activists’ experiences of disassociation and exclusion from the political sphere.

Keeping your mouth shut

The experience of cultural marginalisation and hostility to their EDL affiliation (see Chapter 2) leads many respondents to ‘keep their mouth shut’ about their political views. Tina had made a conscious decision not to let fellow university students know she was in the EDL, ‘not because ... I’m ashamed of it, but purely because ... I don’t want things getting back to tutors and ... people being judgemental of me, or even worse kicking me out.’ For Tim hostility had affected relations at work and he had come to realise that it is better to keep quiet and maintain work and other social interactions as ‘a separate life from EDL’. Chas says that he tries to avoid getting into discussion about his views because, from past experience, ‘it can get you into a lot of problems. ... But keep your mouth shut, keep your head down. Be alright.’ Since at grassroots level, EDL members have little direct engagement with political institutions, the politics of silencing is primarily experienced through institutions with which they have regular interaction: the police and educational establishments.

The attitude of the police to the EDL is ‘shut your mouth or you’ll get a slap’ (Matt). This is echoed by Ray, who notes that the officers policing the Bristol demonstration had said ‘as long as we kept our noise down they wouldn’t arrest us’. The response to such silencing is often external compliance but internal defiance: ‘I don’t care if the coppers batter us basically. I’m standing there as an English patriot. I’m allowed to stand there. I’m allowed to say my views. He can’t shut me up’ (Connor).

Another regular political encounter for the EDL is the ‘opposition’, who are described not as agents of silencing but as people whose own unwillingness to listen closes down the space for a politics of genuine debate and contestation. Members of the local youth division had tried to engage counter-demonstrators in discussion when they found themselves mistakenly directed by police to the other side of the police lines at a demonstration in Bristol. They were interested in finding out more about the counter-demonstrators because they ‘wasn’t just UAF’ (Ray) but a broader coalition (‘We are Bristol’). However, when Ray went into the pub to talk to one of them, he says, ‘She didn’t want to debate. She just wanted me to get off their streets.’ This failed attempt to engage served to confirm that the minds of others were closed:

They don’t want to listen. They don’t want to listen to our point of view. Then later on, they come to you and say ‘We don’t want you here’. ‘Why don’t you want us here?’ ‘Because you’re racist.’ ‘No we aren’t racist.’ ‘Yes you are.’ ... As soon as you start going around trying to explain. ‘You’re a racist.’ Boom. They don’t have none of it. Get the camera. Take a picture of the racist. Put it on the Internet. (Connor)

While, as Back (2002: 47) found in the course of research with a skinhead gang in the West Midlands, an articulated desire to ‘have a debate’ with the object of hostility (referred to by the respondents as ‘Pakis’) might simply create another opportunity in which to assert ‘white selfhood’, what is telling in Connor’s statement is his construction of self as powerless and the *object* of hostility. While his subjective experience of powerlessness may not be reflected in his objective structural position (and is a consequence of his choice to identify himself as an EDL activist), it remains a crucial factor in understanding activism.

Former EDL Chair Steve Eddowes also expresses frustration that past attempts ‘to enter into dialogue with Muslim communities’ had failed. As an example of this he cites the case of EDL engagement with Conservative parliamentary candidate for Dudley North, Afzal Amin. Amin was forced to resign his candidacy in March 2015 when tapes were released exposing an apparent plot to stage an EDL demonstration in Dudley against the planned new mosque for which Amin would later take credit for having persuaded the EDL to call off.¹ Amin’s claim that he had been the victim of a ‘sting’ by the EDL is dismissed by Eddowes (2015) who had attended meetings with him on the understanding that Amin would facilitate dialogue with those leading the new mosque project.

The institutionalisation of silencing is experienced by respondents also through the education system. Chas explains how he was excluded from college for wearing an EDL hoodie. Brett also recounts how he had been ‘kicked out’ of religious education lessons in school in Year 10 for objecting to studying Islam and that he had been prohibited from talking about the EDL:

... in one of my lessons in science I was talking about the EDL to another lad ... and then one of my teachers just got me removed from the lesson ... There was no-one in that room that was Muslim and there was no way it could have

hurt anybody – me talking about the EDL. It’s my view, it’s freedom of speech. I should be allowed to say it. So I got pulled out in front of four teachers being questioned about my views. It’s my view, respect my view. (Brett)

A number of respondents suggest that their experience in the EDL is indicative of the wider abandonment of the principle of ‘freedom of speech’. The media is a particular object of criticism. Declan complains that the host of the official EDL radio show, Geoff Mitchell, had given an interview to ITV news, but the substance of what he said had been excluded from the broadcast:

It’s like Geoff who does the radio show ... he actually did a TV interview for ITV news. He was there for 10 minutes but they only played 30 seconds of this interview and that was talking about why we were in Norwich that day. And she asked him ‘What are your views on Islamic influence?’ and all that. So he told them honestly but it did not make it onto the news. He was oppressed. His freedom of speech was oppressed but when they interviewed a UAF woman [*in angry voice*] ‘We don’t want racist and fascist groups like English Defence League marching through our city.’ (Declan)

The experience of the Walthamstow demonstration, when counter-demonstrators occupied the space designated for the EDL rally and prevented speeches taking place (Pilkington, 2012) was described by one demonstrator as effectively ‘taking our freedom of speech away’ (Jason). Explaining her anger at attempts to prohibit EDL marches, Lisa says she feels ‘very strongly that we just need to be heard, you know, and respected’. Recognition, in the form of political voice, is thus central to EDL activism.

The ‘racism’ label

The politics of silencing is discursively implemented through what respondents refer to as the application of the label of ‘racism’. As Peter puts it, ‘People are so scared of that word, and being called a racist ... when half the things people say and do isn’t racist.’ He illustrates this by recounting how, when he was at school, a Sikh pupil, with whom he was friends, was distressed (due to family problems) and ‘this other lad was sort of taking the piss out of him cause he was crying in school’. The response of the school had been to warn other pupils to ‘be careful what we say’ lest it be interpreted as racist. From this Peter had concluded that ‘if you’re bullying someone that’s black, or Asian or whatever, in school, you’re not told off because it’s wrong, you’re told off because you’re branded a racist’. Peter does not doubt that the boy needed understanding not teasing, and that those taunting him had to be told to stop; his objection was to the inappropriate framing of the issue as one of racism.

When it comes to political dialogue, respondents express their experience in ways that illustrate Mouffe’s (2005: 5) claim that the political sphere has taken on a moral register. Tina complains that one of her fellow students, who was active in the youth section of the Labour Party, dismissed her views simply as ‘You’re

wrong and that's the end of it'. Chas, although perhaps deluding himself that his interlocutors fundamentally agree with him, imagines attempts at political dialogue as interrupted by a set of moral equivalences that 'block' engagement:

Sometimes people are hearing the message and agreeing with me but it's like a mental block in their head. 'We don't, we can't agree with it, they're right wing, they're fascists, they're Nazis. We can't agree to it. It will be classed as racist if we agree to these people.' (Chas)

The fear of being labelled racist, according to Jack, inhibits people from engaging in activism:

I would say millions of people that agree with what we do, including police officers ... can't say it or move in a circle where they are too worried about offending people or too worried about being attacked by people because they believe in something. People are too frightened to stand up ... They won't come out on the streets and start demonstrating with us because they are too frightened of getting their faces shown on TV or they are too frightened of what people might think, 'Oh you are a racist', because we live in a multicultural society. (Jack)

The government is also accused of not addressing issues for fear of being perceived 'racist' (Tim) whilst using its power to block institutional access to the political sphere such that any political route becomes impossible for the EDL because 'they just won't be allowed to. They'll be shunned off. They'll have a national newspaper find something about them, even if it hasn't happened, to try and break the EDL down' (Jack). Matt complains that, in his experience, the response to any success by the far right (citing past electoral successes of the NF and BNP) is that they 'mix the wards up' to prevent it happening again. In a shocking statement, Andrew blames the actions of Anders Breivik in Norway on precisely what he calls a 'silencing of the right':

... people weren't ready to listen, because the right were silenced, if anyone spoke out about immigration or about these rape issues or these crime issues, these left-wing people, these so called innocent people who got killed, they would silence them and they would accuse them of being racist, they would contact ... the jobs and the clubs and the churches or wherever else that they go and accuse them of racism, bigotry, and, all the other '-isms', then it would jeopardise their future like it has done mine. (Andrew)

Andrew had lost his job following exposure of his support for Breivik and the KKK in the local newspaper, and he goes on to claim that, after the publication of the article, 'four big black men came to my kickboxing club looking for me. And one of them had a weapon. But luckily I wasn't there that day, but if I had have been there, they could've made sure that I was silenced for good' (Andrew). While Andrew's views are deeply disturbing and not typical of the EDL mainstream (see Chapter 4), this feeling of being silenced is shared more widely among the respondent set and indeed in wider society. Lone and Silver (2014: 179–80) found

that residents in a white working-class community in Manchester felt that they were not able to talk freely about immigration and that articulating concerns and opinions that differed from 'the mainstream' risked being seen as 'a racist'. Similarly, research with ordinary young people (not activists) undertaken as part of the larger MYPLACE project, of which this study of the EDL is a part, found evidence that young people felt issues such as immigration were excluded from mainstream political discourse.² Making the connection between structural forms of inequality, cultural stigmatisation and political marginality, one respondent in the UK understood this was because immigration was an issue of concern for working-class people: 'It just seems to be questions that affect MPs and things and people of the class of politics as it were that seem to get discussed rather than the things that generally affect the working person' (Grimm and Pilkington, 2015: 216). Thus while Ware (2008: 3) warns against accepting claims that the issue of immigration has been silenced in the past, and it is certainly true that these anxieties are exploited by anti-immigration and far right political parties,³ that sections of the population experience the political realm as silencing some issues cannot be denied.

'Politics ain't us'

I'm not interested in politics. ... I don't want to be another man putting a suit on, sitting there lying and bound by political correctness. ... I'm interested in change for this country. (Tommy Robinson on BBC, *Sunday Politics*, 16 June 2013)⁴

In this extract from an interview with Andrew Neil on the BBC's *Sunday Politics* show, Tommy Robinson is explaining why he would not stand for election and why the EDL will not put up candidates. Andrew Neil interprets this as evidence that he is 'not interested in democratic politics ... It's the politics of the street that you're interested in which is the hallmark of extremism.' Robinson's rejection of the formal political system, however, is far from radical. It has been widely demonstrated on the basis of population surveys that there is an erosion of trust in politicians, disidentification with mainstream parties and growing criticism of key political institutions and the performance of democracy across European societies (Hay, 2007). Hay (2007: 39), however, rejects the tendency to explain trends towards political disaffection, disenchantment and disengagement as a result of problems in 'the demand side', that is, a lack of responsiveness and engagement by voters. He argues, on the contrary, that it is 'the supply side' that is the problem as the politics on offer to the electorate has been downgraded through: the 'marketization' of electoral competition and the narrowing of the range of the policy spectrum; and the embracing of public-choice theory and the consequent projection onto politicians, political elites and public officials more generally of narrowly instrumental assumptions (2007: 56–57). Not only does this fuel the negative characterisation by the public of politicians as self-interested but also an increasing tendency to 'depoliticise' public policy as politicians shift responsibility for policy-making and/or implementation to independent public

bodies and constrain still further the sphere for policy-making. It is hardly surprising, he argues, that in a context in which even politicians concede that politics is something we need rather less of, public political disaffection and disengagement are rife (2007: 58). Indeed, the impact of this downgrading of politics as the pursuit of the collective good is intensified given that it coincides with the rise of the 'critical' citizen, resulting in a growing 'democratic deficit' emerging from the divergence between levels of satisfaction with the performance of democracy and public aspirations (Norris, 2011: 4–6). These deeper political processes underpin surface manifestations of 'disengagement' from conventional politics.

Scepticism about the electoral process is common among grassroots members of the EDL. Many respondents said they do not vote because 'they're all a waste of time' (Matt). Chas said that he would vote, but only 'when there's actually a party out there where I can relate to', while Michelle was waiting to vote until she 'had a good reason to'. Others simply have not even thought about voting (Kyle) or see 'no point' (Ray, Connor) in doing so: 'if they're not EDL, I'm not voting for them' (Connor). Two respondents were not on the electoral register (Chris, Sean); for Sean, this had been a conscious choice since he feared registering would mean 'they'd know everything about ya'.

The disengagement of EDL respondents from the formal political sphere is generally active rather than passive. Three respondents had spoiled their ballot paper or advocated doing so rather than not voting (Mike, Ryan, Euan).

EUAN: Yeah I've voted. I've voted Labour a few times. I've voted UKIP and I just think they are all lying, spineless arse wipes. You know. If you could have a vote of no confidence I'd vote for that. ...

INT: So when did you stop voting then? Was there a particular turning point where you thought 'that's enough'?

EUAN: The last one. ... To be honest I just writ 'EDL' on my ballot paper. I just writ 'EDL' over it. That's all I could do.

Ian, who had been a member of the Labour party for three to four years in his early twenties, said that he had left after being disgusted at the way in which the local electorate was taken for granted. He recounts, to illustrate this, an occasion when he was standing at the bar next to a local Councillor who declared to anyone listening that 'the people am that thick on these estates that Labour could ... put up a pig for election, they'd still vote for it' (Ian). This feeling is echoed in Lone and Silver's (2014: 178) study of a white working-class district in Manchester where local politics had been dominated by the Labour Party for decades.

Others do vote, because it is important to, but have no greater trust in the system or confidence that their vote will 'change anything' (Jordan, Carlie). Lisa explains that she votes not out of a sense that it will have any impact but in recognition of the fact that it is a right that 'women died for' and 'because there are countries in this world where they are told they are not allowed to vote or if you

don't vote for me ... then we will kill you basically'. Others say they do, or would, vote, but qualify this with an express antipathy for the three main parties (Ed, Declan, Andrew, Ollie). Michelle repeats a common sentiment that mainstream parties do not deliver on their promises: 'what they are saying and what they do is two different things. ... They are just ripping people off really' (Michelle). That is not to say that some respondents, usually out of family tradition, did not vote for the main parties: four respondents (Tina, Ed, Lisa, Jason) had voted in the past, or said they would vote in the future, for the Conservative Party; one respondent (Kane) said he would vote Labour while another had in the past (Euan) and one had been a member of the Labour Party (Ian).

The lack of formal political engagement is extended to other forms of activism. Participation in EDL actions is reported to be the first real political or civic engagement for most respondents. Exceptions are involvement in animal rights campaigns (Ollie), street preaching (Andrew), charity work (Jason, Ollie, Andrew, Kane) and campaigns against cases of miscarriage of justice (Euan) as well as membership of the BNP (Ed, Declan) or National Front (Rob).

More remarkable than the expression of common disillusionment with the party political system is that, despite their current active political engagement in the EDL, many respondents deny any interest in 'politics' per se.

CHRIS: I don't follow politics.

RAY: Nor me. I can't answer no questions about politics.

CHRIS: Politics are bollocks. I don't know nothing about politics. I don't follow politics.

RAY: Ask me a question about politics, and I'll phone me granddad. ...

CHRIS: I don't follow them. I don't read about them. So I can't answer ... I don't know anything about politics.

Michelle claims she has neither understanding of, nor interest in, politics while Richard articulates his antipathy in a common expression of distrust in politicians:

... never really been into politics, I don't really understand like ... I just think they're all bullshitters, politicians. I just think, you know, gonna tell as many lies as they can to get into you know, government, or into power or whatever then just do what they want and fuck the country up even more. (Richard)

The disavowal of politics voiced by EDL respondents thus appears marked by a clear distinction between the politics of talk and the not-politics of action. This is epitomised in discussion within the movement about whether the EDL should seek a more political route forward (via electoral representation) or remain true to its roots as a 'street movement'. There was a gut rejection of the political among the youth division respondents who associated being 'political' with 'debating with other fucking parties' (Chris). The implications of the rejection of 'debate' for understanding EDL members' wider views on democratic (or non-democratic) ways forward are discussed in the following section. Here it is important to note the concern of many respondents that taking 'the political route' would signify the

prioritisation of words over action. Connor argues that 'We don't want to debate. We want to do something about it.' And, as is evident in the following discussion between Connor and an older respondent (who had recently moved from the EDL to the EVF), Connor rejects arguments that being 'political' is necessary to make an impact:

ROB: You need to be political to get anywhere.

CONNOR: Yeah but what do you get out of sitting in a room voicing your opinion, shouting at each other? You know what I mean? If you don't agree with something you are arguing with someone over a table. You know what I mean? Or pointing fingers.

ROB: Which is exactly what we are doing now.

CONNOR: Not really. We are going to the streets and we are doing it, proving that we can go to the streets and not sit in a room, do you know what I mean?

Specifically on the question of whether a, at the time of interview, recently formed alliance with the British Freedom Party (BFP) was a good thing, there was also split opinion. When I interviewed Chas, Tommy Robinson had just stepped down as Co-Chair of the BFP to concentrate on his EDL role and this met with Chas's approval. He did not agree with those who said 'we need to go down the political route ... We don't. There's nothing wrong with the street movement.' Tim was also unsure about the rationale for a political route and erred towards prioritising action:

I preferred it when there was like mass street movement. Look, actions speak louder than words because I reckon they'll just see it as another BNP and it's just like I don't know. ... I'm just unsure. ... But I'm not political. ... I'm just more action. Just get on the streets. Let's get on the streets make ourselves be heard. (Tim)

Others, however, are positive about a political route for the EDL. Euan states unequivocally that 'I think we need representation'. Jason also says 'I hope that eventually the EDL will get someone elected. ... I reckon it'd be a big step forward for us.' He goes on to suggest that he thought Kevin Carroll and Tommy Robinson would make good MPs 'because they speak their minds, they tell the truth' (Jason). Some respondents go further and recognise the EDL, and their own activism in it, as definitively 'political' (Jason, Lisa). Lisa clarifies that she is not political in the sense of being interested in what the government says – 'because ... they are all going to do the same thing just different ways' – but she is interested in what is going on in the world and sees herself as 'political in my views'. Others are less ambivalent about their political interests and ambitions. Nick said he had 'always been interested in politics and the right wing and all of that' and intended, when he was older, to get involved in a political party because 'it's purely political isn't it? It's not just about demos here and demos there, it's about appealing to the British people.' Ollie said he did something 'political' several times a week and saw himself as different from his peers: 'I'm a lot more politically minded than everyone else' (Ollie). Ed had stood for election (for the BNP) in the local council elections in his

area three times. Tina was studying politics at university and hoped to enter local politics after she graduated because 'One voice may, might make a difference ... I don't wanna be doing marches for the rest of my life to try and be heard. I wanna actually be in there, trying to be heard' (Tina). Looking to the future, the former Chair of the EDL does not rule out 'a political wing' of the EDL but sees the way forward as one of continuing to hold street protests and demonstrations whilst pursuing, in parallel, strategies that are targeted at the government more directly, including lobbying and using the Freedom of Information Act (Eddowes, 2015).

Both for those who oppose a political route for the EDL, prioritise 'action' over 'talk' and deny they themselves are 'political' and for those who embrace the political, however, activism is above all about needing to 'be heard'. Politics in general holds no interest for Michelle 'as long as our voices get heard, that's what counts'. Connor sees the point in demonstrations as being a way to do politics authentically: 'You stand there and you be heard for who you am. It don't matter who you are but you should just be heard for who you are like and your views' (Connor). In this sense EDL claims for recognition are not dissimilar from those pursued by other movements – such as the LGBT rights or anti-racist movements – who have linked structural forms of inequality, discrimination or exclusion to their own political marginality (Kenny, 2012: 26). What is sought – notwithstanding the different content of the message – is political voice.

Being heard: piercing the silence

Activism in the EDL provides a way of cutting through the politics of silencing and finding a political voice. This is evident in the meanings respondents attach to their participation in actions and what they feel it achieves. These meanings range from the predominantly rational – 'getting your point across' – to the cathartic and emotional – acting 'loud and proud'. Underpinning this activism is the distinction it reinforces between the duplicitous chatter of formal politics and the practice of 'telling it as it is' in a non-politics of action.

Getting your point across

Reflecting on the meaning of their activism in the EDL, primarily through participation in street demonstrations, respondents repeatedly refer to the importance of 'getting heard' (Sean, Tina), 'getting your voice out there in the public' (Michelle) or 'getting your point across' (Chas, Jason, Jordan, Richard, Connor, Chris). As Kane puts it, 'We're there for a reason. We ain't there for the fun of it, we are always there for a reason.' This rationalisation of activism is reflected in Andrew's description of how his small group of Infidels had mobilised their resources in the form of skills and equipment in order to stage a flash demo against ethnic bullying outside a local school:

Ollie written up a fantastic speech ... which we took it in turns on the megaphone to speak out, and ... there was a couple of teachers and a couple of other

parents who stopped to listen to us and they and they shook our hands and says 'well done', the reception that we got was genuinely positive. (Andrew)

Demonstrations are worthwhile, therefore, if 'You've got your word out. So more people know what you am about. ... [A]s long as only one person listens to what we said, and thought "that's right that is"' (Chris). Connor had taken this aim off the street and onto the airwaves by setting up his own EDL radio show on BlogTalkRadio (mirroring the East Anglian EDL Radio Show), which, he said, 'voices our opinion'.

Speaking out also carries a cathartic dimension. Eddowes (2015) says he experienced 'a great sense of release from being at demos'. Chas, who admits that he often keeps his views to himself because talking has led to him being 'de-friended' and disowned by certain members of the family, thinks it is important to talk about the difficult issues that the EDL raises: 'There is definitely a problem out there. No one was speaking about it. People were too scared to speak about it. So why not speak about it? Get it off your chest and get it all out' (Chas). Others are aware of the psychodynamics of their EDL participation. Lisa is conscious that EDL activism is a way of channelling her anger. Tim had experienced his participation in one of the early EDL demonstrations as the release of a long-standing 'pent up anger', which he traces back to an incident when he was 16 years old and the police 'beat the living shit out of me':

... basically just a lot of pent up anger and it was just like we finally felt like ... we was in this unstoppable force and it was just like ... people had to listen and it was just like we keep being loud and like wild. Not so much wild but ... for me it was just like this massive built-up anger just screaming out of me. (Tim)

EDL activism therefore not only provides a platform to speak or have your voice heard. Passions remain a key moving force in politics (Mouffe, 2005: 24) and there is a real pleasure and release experienced in letting go and 'being loud'.

Being loud

RAY: When we first started EDL ... we always got told it would never be a politics thing. But now all of a sudden they want to be in politics and they want to do this and that.

CHRIS: The day it goes to politics, that's the day I come out.

RAY: That'll be the day that I come out because if we're in politics it's going to look bad when we go to a demo or we go on a march and all that's going to stop. We am going to end up being peaceful. Yes, we are peaceful but when you're a proper official peaceful protester, you can't drink, you can't do nothing. You all just stand there quiet, listening. That ain't EDL. EDL's loud.

CHRIS: Loud and proud.

RAY: If I've got to go there and read the *Sunday Times*, like, that ain't happening. Know what I mean?

As argued above, EDL activists experience the current political sphere as a politics of silencing. This silencing produces a deeper sense of disenfranchisement, which is evident in respondents' wider disengagement from, and populist critique of, the formal political sphere, envisaged by Ray as a space where you 'go ... and read the *Sunday Times*'. EDL activism creates a space to resist this silencing. This can involve 'being loud' in a very literal sense. Chanting (as discussed in the previous chapter) is central to EDL activism because when you chant you 'make it loud and proud of who we am' (Connor). But almost any opportunity to make noise is relished: chanting, singing, laughing, stamping, banging, rattling. As a crowd escorted by the police across London on the tube came up the escalator at Blackhorse Road station to reach the muster point for the national demo at Walthamstow, people begin banging on its sides, making as much noise as possible (field diary, 1 September 2012). At a demo in Rotherham, younger demonstrators backed up against steel barriers erected to protect the social services building opposite the police station (outside which the demonstration was held) started to bang against the metal to maximise the noise being made by the demonstrators who had started to clap and stamp their feet, physically enacting the call from the podium that it was time to 'stamp out abuse' (field diary, 13 September 2014). Being loud is given rationalised meaning also in official EDL statements. In the European Defence League's 'Memorandum of Understanding', for example, being 'loud' is seen to be an important way of voicing support for reformist Islam in its battle against fundamentalism: 'The more we capitulate, the more we appease, the harder the reformer has to fight. The more we abandon our own principles, the more we forget our pride, the more confident the fundamentalist becomes. That is why we need to be loud.'⁵ When Tommy Robinson fronted the first event of the (official) Pegida UK movement outside Birmingham (6 February 2016), the new movement was symbolically distanced from the EDL by designating it a 'silent walk' and banning chants and colours.

The notion of 'loud and proud' is used most widely to refer to EDL activism by younger respondents and can become a site of tension, especially intergenerational. Members of a local youth division had been criticised for chanting at a service station during the journey to the national demonstration at Dewsbury in 2012. In interview afterwards Connor says he had resisted the call to keep their noise down since, for him, being heard and seen is what EDL activism is about:

Well we went on their coach yeah to Dewsbury and obviously what do you do when you are out on a demo? You chant. You be proud of what you are doing. Well we went to the Services yeah and we was chanting 'E, EDL' and like they [older members] was calling us dickheads and that cause we had our photo took with the flag and that cause we weren't scared to show who we fucking was man. But it was them lot and they was all just sat there on the coach man reading the Sunday fucking Times having a glass of wine. Fuck that. You don't do that on demo day. You go out man, you are bawling, you are ready for it, do know what I mean? You are ready to prove your point. Them weren't man. They was just dead boring. Fuck that man. [gets passionate] You wanna be loud. You wanna be proud. (Connor)

In similar vein, another young respondent recounted how he had started an 'anti-front seat' campaign on the coach to Bradford as he had been annoyed by those 'at the front' with their rules and complaints about behaviour' (field diary, 9 November 2013). In this sense younger members experienced the practice of 'silencing' as coming not only from outside but as exercised also by those with more power within the EDL: 'The youths don't really get an opinion, do you know what I mean? If you travel with the olders you listen to them, what them do, you've gotta do' (Connor). However, as the response of both Chas and Connor indicate, younger members are not afraid to challenge the right of older members to dictate behavioural norms within the movement. In an attempt to redefine authority in the movement, Chas points out that one of those in the front seats trying to dictate how the young ones behave 'hadn't even been on a demo for two years'. Moreover, when they have the opportunity to organise events for themselves, such as a 'meet and greet' for the local youth division, Connor resists the adults' practice of holding such recruitment drives inside and away from trouble and insists on the importance of not only being heard but being seen:

Who'd wanna sit in a pub talking bollocks? You gotta be out on the street. They wanna be active. They [young people] wanna be like putting their face across so that's why I called the meet and greet in the middle of [names town]. Literally in the middle. And we *will* be doing it public, and it can attract people. It probably will kick off and I'll get my head kicked in and that. But it is still gonna attract a crowd, do you know what I mean? They will know that the EDL have touched down. (Connor)

For the most part being 'loud and proud' has meaning in and of itself (being heard and being seen). However, the emotional and rational dimensions of activism are intertwined:

See that's when you feel you are doing a cause, yeah? I mean when you've got 3,000 people there all for the same reason, not there for throwing bricks or what not you know we are there we are marching that's when you feel proud. It's like being in the army at the end of the day. You are there and you are there for a good cause. (Lisa)

Where a particular object or substance is attached to the 'pride' expressed it is related to Englishness: 'We are loud and proud about being English' (Chris). 'English and proud' was also seen emblazoned on a T-shirt worn by a demonstrator at a demonstration in Rotherham (field diary, 13 September 2014). As discussed in Chapter 3, Englishness is primarily defensively articulated, being constructed, in a similar way to white working-class identity, as a loser from post-war changes in society (Clarke and Garner, 2010: 203). Respondents thus recognise that it is 'a bit dodgy' to talk about being 'English' and defensively assert that it is 'not racist' to call yourself English. Asserting pride in one's Englishness in this way can act to overcome or demonstratively reject a perceived 'shame' attached to it. Ray, Smith and Wastell (2004: 36) argue that racist violence 'represents an attempt to re-establish control, to escape from shame into a state of pride' where shame is experienced by the perpetrators because they feel

weak, disregarded and unfairly treated while they imagine their Asian victims as powerful, successful and arrogant. It is conceivable that 'being loud' and standing 'proud' play a similar role of seeking to reinstate a perceived 'natural order', although caution is exercised here since in this study 'shame' was not an articulated emotion and interviews were not analysed for verbal and paralinguistic cues for shame (as in the Ray, Smith and Wastell study). Certainly there is some evidence that milder forms of intimidation – through visibility and strength in numbers – are important elements of activism. A street demonstration 'lets people know we are out there' (Jack) and being able to 'put men there' is a sign of the strength of the movement (Ray). Chants of 'Whose streets? Our streets' and 'We'll do what we want' provide the soundtrack to the visual display of presence and clearly seek to assert control and 'rights'. These rights are not always at the expense of an Asian 'other' but might be claims made against the police, the government, local authorities or the wider public. Such visibility also generates notoriety that can act as a (dubious) sort of pride. Andrew claims that 'I'm a little bit of a celebrity because of what happened last year when I was exposed for supporting Anders Breivik ... I can try and change my appearance a little bit but there'll always be somebody in that crowd who will spot me.' Respondents repeatedly note that police officers recognise them and often know them by name (Ian, Connor, Ed, Matt, Kurt, Declan). Locally people are recognised frequently from media reports of demonstrations (Tim, Connor, Chris, Ray) and, Tim recounts how he had been congratulated and shaken by the hand by a bouncer at a club on a night out. In this study only male respondents took pride in notoriety; women respondents tended to avoid being known for fear of the consequences for work, study and family.

'We ain't debating': anti-politics = anti-democratic?

Politics has failed; it is time for action now because politicians have never listened to us. (Declan)

Feeling themselves silenced by constraints on legitimate issues for discussion and marginalised, through class position, from the formal political realm, EDL activists seek alternative ways to gain recognition and claim political voice. As detailed above, these include both attempts to engage in political dialogue ('get your point across') as well as more emotional demonstrations of the desire to be heard ('loud and proud'). The point of this activism, however, is to 'be heard'; for politics to work, it has to be conducted in a public sphere governed not by disembodied, rational deliberation but in which the experience of listening is central (McDonald, 2006: 200). The sense that this is not happening leads to a rejection of politics and call for 'action'. The extent to which such 'action' might go beyond the norms of democratic politics, or involves a vision of a non-democratic political system, is discussed in this final section.

Mudde's (2007: 30) distinction between the populist radical right, which remains broadly democratic despite opposing some fundamental values of

liberal democracy and the extreme right, which is in essence anti-democratic, is helpful for considering views within the EDL. The leadership and vast majority of grassroots members are highly critical of the contemporary working of democracy. The criticism voiced by respondents in this study, however, is directed primarily at governments (past and present) rather than at the democratic system in principle. Anger is expressed at the perceived failure by the government to deal with issues of terrorism and, in particular, at the response to the murder of Lee Rigby. Another common complaint is that the government deals with trivial issues while the really important problems, such as poverty, are ignored (Euan), or buries its head in the sand rather than being honest with people about the state of affairs (Michelle). Government cuts are seen as targeting the wrong people (Ray, Euan, Declan, Jordan, Tim) and generating an ever-growing divide between rich and poor (Tina, Michelle).

These criticisms bring forth some suggestions for how the system might be made more responsive. One proposal was for a mechanism for withdrawing a government's mandate mid-term if it was not delivering what it had promised (Chas). Jordan expresses the sentiment behind this argument: 'every government promise you this, promise you that and as soon as they are in power everything is forgot about. You are just another number that's got them there.' Declan went further, suggesting that the current political system did not constitute democracy. He was careful, however, to preface this with the explicit statement that he was not 'anti-democratic' in as much as 'I don't believe in dictatorship and a one-party system' (Declan). Lisa, implicitly drawing on the notion of hegemonic rule, was critical of the way that the system works to prevent change: 'you are brainwashed from a very early age into believing that there is no better way to run the country'. She suggests a presidential system would be preferable to a parliamentary democracy on the grounds that it involved 'less people'. However, respondents fall short of expressing support for any authoritarian mode of government.

The exception here is the three respondents identifying as Infidels (see Chapter 4) who openly declare that they are national socialists. Nick claims that history shows that 'the successful nations have never really been democratic' and cites Germany under Hitler and Spain under Franco as successful non-democratic states. Ollie also declared that 'I don't agree with democracy' and argued that a single-party system (gaining power through revolution rather than election) was preferable to parliamentary democracy since his primary concern was the establishment of a socialist system, and 'you can't have democracy and socialism'. However, there is no support for fascism among mainstream respondents (two respondents explicitly denounce it) and even one of the Infidels respondents makes a point of distancing himself from fascism since it is rooted in 'national capitalism' rather than National Socialism (Nick).

Mainstream EDL rhetoric at grassroots level is thus almost completely devoid of any vision of an alternative to democratic governance. This might be anticipated given the concerns among respondents, and the leadership of the movement, to distance the EDL from traditional 'far right' associations with fascism or National Socialism. However, it is somewhat surprising when set in the context of the wider

MYPLACE project where the survey of young people revealed surprisingly high levels of support for authoritarian rule⁶ in the UK research locations; support for a strong leader not constrained by parliament was expressed by 56.1 per cent of young people across the two locations and for army rule by 27.7 per cent (Grimm and Pilkington, 2015: 220). EDL visions of alternatives to parliamentary democracy seem mild against such 'mainstream' attitudes. Comparing the relative value of politicians and armed services personnel in the context of widespread government cuts, Connor states, 'I'd rather drop the 400 politics [politicians] and have that one soldier. Because that one soldier can make a difference.' However, although demands for greater protection (material and moral) for the armed forces and a tougher stance against demonstrations of 'disrespect' towards them are central to EDL ethos and activism, no respondents suggested the army might be an acceptable alternative to democratic government. Moreover, while over half of the MYPLACE survey respondents in the UK locations supported a strong leader unconstrained by parliament, the EDL has promoted a populist message about the direct connection between people and political power but has sought to avoid an organisational structure dependent on a strong charismatic leader and encourages a sense among members that 'every single one of you is a leader' (see Chapter 2).

The only alternative suggested to parliamentary democracy by EDL respondents in this study was the restoration of the powers of the monarchy: 'I don't believe there should be like a Parliament. I just reckon it should be Queen and country' (Neil). In preferring a monarchy to democracy, Nick also points to the prioritisation of action over the 'talk' he associates with current politics:

... probably just go back to the monarchy, complete monarchy ... I'd rather have that, cause at the moment democratic societies ... they all appear quite weak in all of this, you know they have to talk about everything first instead of doing it, as long as it's in the interests of the state and the people ... it doesn't really matter.
(Nick)

The point of convergence of Nick's anti-democratic (national socialist) views and those of mainstream EDL respondents who do not reject democracy per se, is a shared frustration with the political process as a space for 'talk' rather than action. As Connor puts it, the EDL 'ain't debating'.

It was argued above that this rejection of 'debating' constitutes a critique of the formal political system characterised by meaningless and self-serving 'chatter'. This positioning distinguishes EDL activism not only from traditional political parties, however, but also from other social movements which put the process of debate and deliberation centre stage in the constitution and reclamation of democracy. Castells (2012: 125), discussing the Indignadas movement in Spain, argues that the forms of deliberation and decision-making within the movement aimed explicitly to prefigure what political democracy should be in society at large. By constructing a free community in a symbolic place, social movements that occupy public spaces create a space for deliberation, which

ultimately becomes a political space (2012: 11). However, such deliberative democracy, at the heart of which lies 'talk' and 'rational argumentation' (Della Porta, 2013: 61–62), is not necessarily attractive to those who perceive what is bad about the current political system is that it is 'all talk'. Indeed, the valorisation of the method of consensus central to deliberative democratic approaches may be experienced by others as equally exclusionary. For those for whom formal politics is associated with meaningless debate, the centrality of 'talk' to deliberative democratic alternatives undermines its 'alternative' status and constructs it as an extension of the Habermasian understanding of the public sphere as a sphere of rational, disembodied communication in which freedom is envisaged as an 'endless meeting' (McDonald, 2006: 200).

The question then is whether this rejection of deliberative democracy reduces EDL activism to the articulation of politicised grievance or might speak to a different radical democratic critique, which questions claims that 'consensus', as the outcome of deliberation, ensures democratic inclusion. Mouffe (2005: 3) argues that understanding politics as the search for a universal rational consensus can reduce it to attempts to design institutions capable of reconciling all conflicting interests and values, when the essence of democratic politics is, in fact, the legitimate expression of such conflict. Theorists who want to eliminate passions from politics and envisage democratic politics only in terms of reason, moderation and consensus, she argues (2005: 24), fail to understand the dynamics of the political; politics has always had a 'partisan' dimension and for people to be interested in politics they need to have the possibility of choosing between real alternatives. Rancière (1999: 96–97) too points to the importance of contestation for the vibrancy of democracy; when the institutions of parliamentary representation were being contested by generations of militant socialists and communists, he suggests, they were cherished and protected more vigilantly (1999: 97). As a consequence, Mouffe (2005: 66) argues, right-wing populism has made inroads precisely in those places where traditional democratic parties have lost their appeal to the electorate who can no longer distinguish between them in the 'stifling consensus' that has gripped the political system. Bitter arguments over multiculturalism in the 1990s, Hewitt (2005: 153) suggests, is 'the regular fare of democratic politics'. Rancière (2011: 1) argues simply, 'There is politics because the common is divided' and thus 'dissensus', not consensus, lies at the heart of politics.

There is no doubt that 'the point' the EDL seeks to get across generates dissensus not consensus. The question is whether screening out the claims to be heard by groups like the EDL, through a politics of silencing, may not only be increasingly unpalatable given their rising volume and intensity (Kenny, 2012: 32), but whether it is actually in the long-term interest of reclaiming politics and strengthening democracy. If radical democratic critiques are to defend themselves against McNay's (2014: 8) claim that they fail 'to realize their own stated aim of challenging settled political orthodoxies in the name of excluded and oppressed groups', they need to address directly the challenges posed by the embodied politics of the populist radical right.

Conclusion

In this chapter the relationship between EDL activism and the external political environment has been considered. It has illustrated how EDL activists experience the external political realm as a politics of silencing in which the expression of their views, as well as government policy, are constrained by the application of the 'racism label' and learn the best strategy for negotiating this realm is to 'keep your mouth shut'. Lone and Silver's (2014) recent study of a white working-class community in Manchester shows that this experience is far from confined to an extremist minority. This raises the dilemma that while, on the one hand, opening up debate about issues – such as immigration – can be exploited by populist and far right political parties, there is a danger also that allowing 'a growing authoritarian consensus against offensive speech' to develop effectively closes down debate, infantilises the public and marginalises nonconformist ideas (Furedi, 2005: 157).

In light of increasingly assertive arguments made by, or on behalf of, white working-class communities, Kenny (2012: 24) has asked whether we should rethink our tendency to treat them as expressions of 'resentment, racism and grievance' and consider whether they might be thought of as a form of recognition politics and, in some cases, as demands which have a 'rational' basis and 'merit a more sympathetic hearing by the state'. This raises a deeper question in relation to our understanding of democracy of the possibility that populist radical right movements such as the EDL may themselves 'articulate albeit in a very problematic way, real democratic demands which are not taken into account by traditional parties' (Mouffe, 2005: 71). The failure to recognise the impacts of wider structural change on white working-class communities, who have experienced decreasing wages, reduced employment opportunities and declining social mobility for their children over the last three decades, is at least one important factor in a significant decline in democratic engagement and participation (Lone and Silver, 2014: 178). Indeed this goes beyond a disillusionment with formal political institutions and agents; it is reflected in a cultural divide between 'people like us' and the 'do-gooders' (the socially liberal world of individuals and institutions in positions of power) who are perceived not to live in the real world but 'somewhere very secluded, where nothing ever happens' (2014: 179–81). Such a divide runs deeper than 'the angry white men' (older and economically insecure and lowly educated working-class men in particular regions of the country) identified as the core constituency of far right parties such as the BNP (Goodwin, 2011a: 118). It draws on a broader constituency not only alienated from mainstream parties but believing that public institutions are not representing them or their needs and prone to accept unsubstantiated 'public knowledge' as well as messages from populist parties that resonate with pre-existing anxieties (Lone and Silver, 2014: 181).

Notes

- 1 See www.theguardian.com/politics/2015/mar/23/afzal-amin-quits-conservative-candidate-edl-plot-allegations. Accessed: 28.08.2015.

- 2 This is drawn from the semi-structured interview element of the project. Approximately thirty semi-structured interviews were conducted in each of the thirty locations with young people aged 16–25 recruited from the locally representative sample of young people participating in the survey element of the project. The two UK locations were Coventry and Nuneaton.
- 3 Lone and Silver (2014: 172) note that a local BNP candidate in the Manchester area in which their research was conducted played on this sense of being silenced by claiming that anyone ‘who has ever dared to mention immigration has been condemned as “racist”’.
- 4 See www.youtube.com/watch?v=sZHbXhstXG4. Accessed: 28.08.2015.
- 5 See <http://englishdefenceleague.org/european-defence-leagues>. Accessed: 26.06.2012.
- 6 Support for authoritarian rule is constructed from four markers of support for: a strong leader; military rule; a multiparty system; and freedom of speech for the opposition. The survey is based on a representative sample of 16–25 year olds in two locations in each participating country (see note 2).