

Understanding a Populist Discourse:
An Ethnographic Account of the English Defence
League's Collective Identity

By

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Abstract

This thesis will examine the collective identity of the English Defence League by utilising Ernesto Laclau's theory of populism. The empirical research contained within this study was gained via an ethnographic investigation of the EDL which included eighteen months of observations at demonstrations and twenty six narrative interviews conducted with a small group of EDL members. The study will utilise concepts that have been developed by Laclau in order to present a theoretical understanding of the way in which the EDL constructs its collective identity. By examining the role of demands and dislocation, equivalence and antagonism and the empty signifier in constructing the EDL's identity this work will shed new light on how the EDL emerged and the way in which it developed as a populist social movement.

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This work is dedicated to my mom, my dad and my brother, for twenty seven years of love and support.

Any and all mistakes remain my own.

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Introduction

The EDL emerged in the summer of 2009 and has become a regular feature in English town and city centres where it holds regular public demonstrations which attract hundreds and sometimes thousands of supporters. Over the past seven years the EDL has been studied by a variety of academics from within a range of social science disciplines, this thesis will contribute to that literature by providing a theoretically driven ethnographic study of the movement. Until 2016 there had been no in depth full length ethnographic studies of the English Defence League and whilst two ethnographic monographs of the EDL (Busher, 2016, and Pilkington, 2016) have recently been published this thesis will provide a new understanding of the English Defence League by utilising a post-structuralist discourse analysis approach based upon Ernesto Laclau's theoretical conception of populism.

Whilst analyses of the English Defence League have provided many important insights into the movement, there is a lack of theorisation within the academic literature. Specifically, the EDL is under theorised in relation to its collective identity construction and this has a consequent impact on understandings of the movement. Whilst it has been acknowledged that the EDL is a new social movement (Copsey, 2010, Jackson and Feldman, 2011) that is focused on issues of identity there is little attempt within the literature to understand the exact process by which the movement's collective identity is constructed. Instead, the EDL is commonly understood as simply an arena in which "a loose coalition of hardcore football hooligans, far right extremists, and politically unsophisticated white working class youth" (Copsey, 2010, p.5) engage in violence and public performance. This is a view that is also supported by Treadwell and Garland (2011), who argue that the EDL is based upon young working class males with a propensity to violence. However, such reductionist assumptions risk depoliticising the movement and belie the complexity of the EDL as a challenge to community cohesion.

Because of this lack of attention to the collective identity construction of the EDL as a social movement it is often simplified and described as a single-issue anti-Islam movement (Jackson and Feldman, 2011 and Pilkington, 2016); whilst the EDL certainly spreads an Islamophobic message this thesis will seek to demonstrate that the EDL's discourse is more complex than simply anti-Islam rhetoric. In doing so, this work will pair primary data from narrative interviews

and participant observation with key analytical concepts from Laclau's theory of populism which is based upon his and Mouffe's post structuralist discourse theory. By providing the most detailed analysis of the EDL's discourse that has thus far been undertaken this thesis will seek to investigate the movement's collective identity construction with reference to Laclau's concepts of: demands, dislocation, equivalence, antagonism and the empty signifier. By pairing these concepts with first hand ethnographic research this thesis will provide a rich empirical account of the EDL as a movement whilst also remedying the lack of theoretical attention that has so far been paid to the EDL.

In Chapter One the EDL will be positioned as a social movement and it will be argued that it is focused on identitarian issues. The literature on the EDL will also be critically examined and three problematic aspects will be highlighted. In Chapter Two Laclau's theory will be explicated and three research aims developed based upon the critical review of the literature. Chapter Three will explain this work's research approach.

The research aims will utilise Laclau's analytical tools. The three research aims that this study will address are:

- 1) Investigate the preconditions that led to the emergence of the EDL as a populist movement
- 2) Examine how the EDL discourse utilised equivalence and antagonism to construct the 'other'
- 3) (a) Identify the empty signifier that produced equivalence within the EDL identity and (b) identify what impact this empty signifier has on the EDL collective identity

By addressing these research aims the thesis will show that the EDL was not an inevitable outcome of class based anger or simply an arena for young men to commit violence and the single-issue thesis will also be challenged. In Chapter Four it will be highlighted how a diverse range of unfulfilled demands led to a situation of social frustration against the institutional system and how the abuse of British soldiers by a small group of radical Islamists set the tone of the EDL as a movement that sought to 'defend' perceived 'victims' from dangerous 'others'.

Chapter Five will demonstrate that the EDL's discourse is highly populist and use the concepts of equivalence and antagonism to show how the EDL constructed a broad base of support against a constructed 'other' which included

not just Muslims but also government, police and anti-fascist counter demonstrators. This will highlight the process by which the EDL constructed a unique identity in an antagonistic struggle against the ‘other’, which allowed the EDL to include an array of different groups within its movement, including an ‘LGBT’ division, a ‘Sikh’ division and a ‘Jewish’ division.

In chapter Six it will be argued that the EDL’s identity is based upon a sense of collective victimhood and that this drives the EDL’s understandings of its struggle. There has been almost no attention paid to the way in which the EDL have co-opted a concern with victims from the progressive left, despite the frequency in which appeals to victimhood and claims of victim status are presented within the EDL’s discourse. It is therefore claimed in Chapter Six that ‘victim(s)’ operates as an empty signifier within the EDL discourse, constructing meaning and uniting EDL members together.

This work has focused on the rise of the EDL in 2009 up until 2014 when the research ended, since 2014 the EDL has fragmented, however, as is demonstrated in Chapter Six it still makes appeals to victimhood and so the arguments contained in this study remain relevant. By acknowledging the complexity of the English Defence League, by conducting detailed ethnographic research and by providing a sophisticated theory driven analysis of the movement this thesis seeks to enhance our understanding of the EDL.

Chapter One – The English Defence League and Populism

Introduction

This chapter will examine the key literature on the English Defence League in order to position the group as a social movement, in doing so it will be argued that as a social movement the EDL is identity focused. Following on from this, three aspects of the academic literature on the EDL will be problematised, these being: the issue of class based understandings of the EDL, the lack of attention paid to the formation of the movement's collective identity and the suggestion that the EDL is purely a single issue anti-Islamic movement. Once these three aspects have been identified and challenged then the remainder of the chapter will discuss and critique various approaches to populism before briefly sketching out Laclau's theory of populism that this work will utilise.

1.1 Positioning the English Defence League: A New Social Movement

Since its emergence the EDL has been studied by academics from a variety of disciplines including political science, sociology and criminology; within the literature the EDL has most often been portrayed as something new both in terms of its organisation and its politics. The EDL was formed in Luton in 2009 and quickly became a national movement that has never stood for election but which has organised hundreds of national and local demonstrations. It is a grass roots organisation that has a small leadership team who release information and organise demonstrations via the internet but who rely upon a rather loose and decentred structure of local geographical and special interest divisions from around the country to supply 'boots on the ground' at demonstrations. Because of this there exists some consensus amongst academic researchers that the EDL is a new social movement (see for example, Copsey 2010; Jackson, 2011 and Pilkington 2016). However, what this description of the EDL as a new social movement means and how it differentiates the EDL from other, more traditional political parties is less clear. This section will draw attention to the EDL as a

new social movement and will show how it is positioned, broadly, on the ‘far right’; however, this study will seek to examine the EDL as a populist social movement.

In addition to highlighting the organisational structure students of the EDL have also regularly drawn attention to the movement’s ‘new’ political qualities, suggesting that it is qualitatively different to previous political mobilisations. There is thus also some agreement that the EDL should be positioned differently to traditional far right political parties and movements. Busher argues that “the emergence of the EDL marked a new chapter in the history of anti-minority activism in Britain” (2016, LOC. 281). Busher also highlights how the targets of the EDL’s activism differ from more traditional exclusionary antagonistic movements, as the EDL targets Islam alone and is not a racist party in the traditional sense.

Jackson has also argued that the EDL is “predicated on...a new type of far right politics” which is best seen as part of the “new far right” (Jackson in Jackson and Feldman, 2011, p.7) that seeks to distance itself from the historically neo-fascist and neo-Nazi groups such as Combat 18, the National Front and the British National Party. It can thus be argued that the ‘new far right’ seek to distance themselves from the crude biological racism of earlier extreme right parties, instead focusing on cultural issues and values and using these to attack ‘others’.

Arguments that stress the ‘newness’ of the EDL tend to revolve around the fact that it is more ‘inclusive’ than traditional far right movements, for example Allen notes that the EDL actually seeks to include some of those “normally excluded by the far right” (Allen, 2011, p.294). Indeed, the EDL has had, at various times and in various strengths, an EDL Jewish division, an ‘LGBT’ division, a ‘Sikh’ division and a female ‘EDL Angels’ division and the movement has actively sought to reach out to other groups and communities. The sight of LGBT symbols, mixed with Jewish stars of David and St George flags is not an unusual sight at large EDL demonstrations, which suggests that the movement is seeking to include those sections of society that traditional far right groups have historically disparaged. It should also be noted how the EDL utilises the language of human rights, something that one would expect a progressive leftist movement to do, indeed, the EDL’s mission statement

explains that “The English Defence League is a human rights organisation”. Jackson has also highlighted how the EDL’s mission statement, as a whole, can be read as a ‘new’ far right political project (2010, p.13). However, despite this new ‘inclusivity’ the EDL as a movement has spread a message of disunity and violence during demonstrations throughout the country.

Because of the EDL’s violence and anti-Islam message the arguments that the EDL is somehow ‘new’ and different to previous incarnations of anti-minority far right political groups has been challenged by Alessio and Meredith. They argue that the EDL has in fact got much in common with the post World War I Italian ‘Blackshirts’ (or ‘Squadristi’) fascists, even going so far as to argue that:

the wearing of hoodies with prominent EDL logos and Union Jacks amounts to a political street uniform similar to the black shirts worn by squadristi members, and that the movement’s public and often violent demonstrations across UK towns and cities bear resemblance to squadristi militia parades (2014, p.106).

However such an argument remains at odds with almost all of the other academic literature on the EDL. Copsey’s initial assessment of the EDL in 2010 remains widely accepted within academic studies of the movement. Copsey argued that “we should not view it [the EDL] simply through the prism of the established far right” because “the EDL is not driven by a fascist or neo-fascist ideological end-goal” (2010, p.5). Copsey’s assertion is important for two reasons: firstly, he stresses the difference between the EDL and more traditional fascist and neo fascist political groups but, secondly, he hints at a core characteristic of the EDL as a new social movement – the lack of an ideological end goal – because new social movements are characterised by their focus on identity rather than ideological imperatives.

As was noted at the beginning of this section, there is consensus around understanding the EDL as a social movement. However, positioning the EDL as a social movement does bring to the fore some issues that should here be briefly addressed. There is some controversy in seeing the EDL as a social movement of the far right, regardless of how ‘new’ it is, because social movements have historically been seen as progressive, and therefore the concept of a ‘far right’ social movement sits uncomfortably (on a normative level) with many research

agendas. Writing in the early years of the ‘new’ social movements Boggs highlighted the research stress upon “Urban social struggles, the environmental or ecology movements, women’s and gay liberation, the peace movement and cultural revolt linked primarily to student and youth activism” (Boggs, 1986, pp.39-40). This research focus was also necessarily linked to a normative conception of new social movements by the scholars who researched them; the following assessment of social movements provides an important example of how the normative judgements of researchers were inextricably tied up with the study of exclusively ‘leftist’ new social movements:

When moved by identity, collectives take on distinct properties. Spurred not by ideology or resource mobilization, identity- based movements act rather than react; they fight to expand freedom, not to achieve it; they mobilize for choice rather than emancipation (Cerulo, 1997, p.393).

Therefore, traditionally, new social movements have been seen to be part of the ‘progressive’ politics and, because of this, students of social movements have often overlooked the non progressive new social movements [NSM’s]. As Pichardo argues, within social movement research:

theorists [have] marginalized social movements that do not originate from the left. Contemporary right-wing movements are not the subject of their focus. Thus the NSM paradigm describes (at best) only a portion of the social movement universe (Pichardo, 1997, p.413).

With the rise of the EDL we can argue that the ‘new politics’ is no longer confined to ‘leftist’ politics of progress and researchers - despite our normative views on reactionary new social movements - must attempt to address the contemporary issues that lead to the emergence of these more regressive social movements. Fortunately, this recognition appears to be taking place; in 2016, as this thesis was close to submission, two monographs on the EDL appeared (Busher 2016 and Pilkington, 2016), both recognising it as a social movement. This new attention to a divisive and regressive social movement is necessary, because with their decentred and identity forming nature and style, movements such as the EDL appear to have more cultural resonance than groups such as the British National Party which, as a traditional ‘far right’ political party, has roughly half as many ‘members’ (Bartlett and Littler, 2011).

Indeed, in recent years the British National Party has become significantly less relevant on the domestic political scene; in 2010 the BNP lost many of its local council seats and in 2014 its fragile grip on the European Parliament came to an end; furthermore, since the expulsion of its leader Nick Griffin in 2014, the BNP has degenerated into petty squabbling and in-fighting. Indeed, during 2010 whilst the BNP began its decline, the EDL achieved both popular attention and numerical support. As Trilling noted early on in the EDL's formation:

As the BNP careered towards disaster in the 2010 general election, the English Defence League was in the ascendant. It appeared to be a new type of far-right movement...it boasted 79,000 'supporters'... [and] could mobilize up to 3000 people [for demonstrations]" (Trilling, 2012, p.183).

This suggests that the EDL's new politics mixed with its decentred organisational structure and online spatial use combined with spectacular direct action has more salience within contemporary culture. We must therefore concede that successful new social movements can originate not just from the left, and thus we must accept that whilst:

In the past, NSM's [New Social Movements'] have been discussed as a creative force of change, signifying directions for cultural and social innovation... there may be a darker side that parallels the dangers presented by collective identities...(Larana et al, 1994, p.30).

This fits with what Copsey has argued is the essential nature of the English Defence League, noting that "as a social movement the EDL...is an 'identitarian' movement" (Copsey, 2010, p.11). This suggests that, as we have noted above, the EDL is primarily based upon identity and spends much of its time challenging those who refuse to accept its identity, which further suggests that both the organisation and the political output of the EDL is based upon a new politics in a way that other traditional far right groups cannot be linked.

Another recent change of research interest that should be noted concerns the assumption made about social movements by those who study them. The theorists of the 1970s saw collective interests as being pre-determined before entry into the social movement and saw social movements as centred upon instrumental interests (see for example, Gamson, 1975 and Tilly, 1978). Later

scholars linked to the cultural turn in the social sciences (see for example Laclau and Mouffe, 1985; Melucci, 1985; Touraine, 1985 and Castells 1997) suggested that such pre-determined collective identities were false. This essentially contested the standard theoretical paradigm- based on Marxist social theory - that saw class as the pre-determined identity upon which engagement in a social movement was predicated upon.

We can thus position the EDL as part of these new social movements and suggest that identity is a core issue; furthermore, later research into such new social movements suggests that collective identity is formed through engagement with the social movement rather than the social movement being seen as a sum total of pre-existing collective identity. Because of this we can argue that there should be a focus on the process through which a new social movement forms and maintains a collective identity. Such an examination would need to consider the language used by the social movement and its supporters and examine how this related to collective identity. Now that we have positioned the EDL as a new social movement which is part of the far right, the next two sections will highlight some key blind spots within the EDL literature that this work will seek to address by utilising Laclau's theory of populism.

1.2 The Issue of Identity: The EDL's Collective Identity

Academic studies of the English Defence League have, traditionally, been tied to the question of class; explanations of and concerns with the emergence of the EDL have often drawn on understandings of the working class. Such explanations tend to involve the EDL being understood as intricately, even inevitably, connected to working class disenchantment, as is suggested by Garland and Treadwell's argument that the EDL is driven by a clever leadership who have "tapped into the frustrations of a disenfranchised section of the white working class" (2011, p.626). Alessio and Meredith similarly suggest that "the anti-Islamism of the EDL, therefore, is presented as a solution to working class frustrations in Britain" (2014, p.108).

However, such class based reductionism that characterises the EDL's political mobilisation as being "enacted upon a passive (white, working class) population" (Pilkington, 2016, p.3) results in an over simplification of the

English Defence League by imposing an externally constructed rigid conceptual category onto the movement. As Busher notes, “abstract categories such as ‘the white working class’” (2016, Loc.1455) are less important to those involved in the movement than micro level factors. By depending upon an over reliance on class based factors to explain the EDL authors such as Garland and Treadwell implicitly suggest that the EDL was and is driven by a narrow range of concerns and thus miss the heterogeneous nature of a movement that has, over the years, appealed to a wider range of identities than one may initially assume. Furthermore, as has been demonstrated above, the EDL is widely seen as a new social movement and such movements, it is argued, have moved beyond purely class based issues:

New social movement theorists argued that participation in such movements could not be predicted by class location... Rather they sought recognition for new identities and lifestyles (Polletta and Jaspers, 2001, p.286).

In their 2011 article Treadwell and Garland use ethnographic case studies of three members of the EDL in order to present a ‘psychosocial’ understanding of the members’ violent activities with the EDL. Treadwell and Garland “understand ‘psychosocial’ as the social scientific attempt to place the subject at an interface between the psychological and the social” (Treadwell and Garland, 2011, p.624). In essence their approach attempts to move beyond pure structural accounts of masculine violence and re-introduce agency (in the form of the ‘psychological’) into the study of the violent activities of the three members of the EDL; in doing so they raise several key issues regarding the nature of collective identity that this study will seek to address.

We should perhaps begin by deciphering exactly what Treadwell and Garland understand the EDL as constituting; they focus on the violent aspects of the EDL and more importantly on the individualised acts of violence committed by the three discrete individuals who make up their ethnographic research. Thus and not surprisingly given the individualised nature of their ethnography, they note that “the EDL has become something of a magnet for disaffected young males prone to resolving their disputes through violence” (Treadwell and Garland, 2011, p.622). The EDL is here seen as an arena in which masculine violence can be expressed, and this masculine violence appears pre-determined

based both on previous “socio-structural factors” (2011, p.623) and on the individual’s psychological development and life history. In an earlier paper they argued that the EDL shared some of the characteristics with more conventional far right groups but that, ultimately, the EDL was a unique fusion between extreme right wing politics and football violence (Garland and Treadwell, 2010). This again would appear to reinforce the notion that the EDL is an arena or outlet for those with pre-existing violent tendencies- tendencies gained through the interplay of both structural and individual psychological factors.

However, this portrayal of the English Defence League (a portrayal that is popular within the British media) is not uncontested; another study of the English Defence League conducted by Bartlett and Littler and commissioned by the think-tank Demos has argued that:

The received wisdom that the EDL is a street based movement comprised of young thugs needs to be revised. Supporters are older and more educated than many assume: 28 per cent are over 30; 30 per cent are educated to university or college level; and 15 per cent have a professional qualification (Bartlett and Littler, 2011, p.5).

Garland and Treadwell also fail to address some crucial points that are highlighted by their own first hand research and which could allow for a complex theoretical understanding of the EDL. For example, one of their research participants stated that:

The Paki, the Muslim, to me is the enemy, they are like everything we are not, like Sikhs and Hindus are not cunts, the Indians, they are ok. They are not like Pakis. Pakis are different...they come here to take advantage of us, they sell fucking smack, rob off whites but not their own, force young girls into prostitution. They are fucking scum (cited in Treadwell and Garland, 2011, p.630).

This raises two important points of interest; firstly, we should note the homogenising process that is occurring here, this is not only the homogenising of ‘Pakis’ (that is Asian Islamic individuals) into a dangerous and malevolent ‘other’ but also the homogenising of ‘Sikhs’, ‘Hindus’ and ‘Indians’ into an acceptable ‘in group’ who are perceived as non threatening and benign.

Secondly, and leading on from this, we need to understand why this homogenising is taking place and why it is directed specifically at a Muslim ‘other’. For Garland and Treadwell this reflects “tabloid fears about young Asian men’s predatory criminality” (2011, p.631) but is also the “product of a more general social experience whereby they [EDL members] felt marginalized and threatened in their own community” (2011, p.631). Thus it appears that we should view this marginalization as leading to ‘disaffected young males’ seeking out violent confrontation (via the arena of the EDL demonstrations) with the Muslim ‘other’; and thus these disaffected youngsters are attracted to the EDL in order to reinforce their own (pre-determined) identity through violence against the ‘Muslim other’. However, it is never really explained how and through what process such an attraction takes place.

In essence, Treadwell and Garland never really seek to understand how this process of identification of the individual is working vis-a-vis the social group (EDL). This is because the identities (both individual and collective) appear to be already ‘pre-determined’; thus, it appears from this analysis that a sub section of the working class contains individuals whose self identity is tied to violent masculinity and this is taken to be a pre-existing identity category and the EDL is viewed simply as providing a convenient arena in which to act out this pre existing identity. Yet Treadwell and Garland’s own research suggests that the EDL is actually providing a specific and uniquely group centred identity which is somehow different from other forms of violent masculinity; for example another one of the interviewees states that physical violence against a “Paki” is “Special”, when asked what he means by ‘special’ his response is telling:

It was personal, you know, in a way that football violence is not...I was proud afterwards. It made me feel like I’d made a stand (Treadwell and Garland, 2011, p.630).

Whilst this is clearly someone who has a propensity towards violence, he himself differentiates between football violence and EDL related violence; however, Garland and Treadwell do not appear to differentiate to the same extent as their interviewee when earlier in the article they suggest that the EDL has become a new vehicle for violent outings “in a world in which domestic football ‘banning orders’ and prohibitive ticket pricing make football a less

attractive arena in which to seek physical confrontation” (2011, p.622). Thus they would appear to suggest that the EDL is simply a new arena for the same thugs (namely a sub section of the violent disaffected and marginalized working class youth) to commit acts of violent aggression. Yet their own research participant seems to challenge this view by noting that there is something inherently different between football violence and EDL violence. As this person has committed violent acts in the past we can suggest that the difference is not in the violent act per se but in the target of the violence and also in the self and collective identity which is formulated by being a part of the English Defence League.

The interviewee appears to be ‘personally’ committed to these identity conceptions and the antagonistic border between the identities of ‘us’ (EDL supporter) and ‘other’ (Muslim male). However, in their desire to place pre determined violence at the heart of their study (which is perhaps not surprising for criminologists) Garland and Treadwell do not provide an understanding of the process of this identification.

With Treadwell and Garland study we are left wondering - why Muslims and why the EDL? If the supporters are driven by structural and psychological misfortune to perpetuate violence, why join the EDL and not some other group or movement, or why not simply riot? The collective organisation (in this case the EDL) is relegated simply to a vehicle of opportunity for violent confrontations, based upon a pre- established and pre- determined identity. Garland and Treadwell use the EDL as a case study of ‘masculinity, marginalization and violence’; but, apart from being seen as an arena or vehicle for opportunistic violence by men already predisposed to violence very little is learned about the EDL and the process through which it constructs a collective identity.

1.3 The Complexity Problem: Not just a Single Issue Movement

The EDL’s anti Islamic message is what attracts most attention from both the public and professional researchers. The EDL was formed in response to the very well publicised abuse of British troops in Luton in March 2009 by a small group of Islamist extremists. Since then the EDL has regularly conflated radical Islamist extremists with Muslims in general. This has meant that the EDL has

frequently and accurately been described as an Islamophobic movement (see Copsey, 2010 and Allen, 2011). Indeed, the EDL as a movement has often sought to distance itself from the BNP and National Front by self identifying as a “single issue group, not a political party” (Busher, Loc3126, 2016) and yet even a cursory examination of EDL transmissions, from speeches to online articles, suggests that the movement targets several other perceived enemies, not only Muslims. Thus, whilst the EDL may be Islamophobic, understanding it as simply a single issue anti-Islam movement is too simplistic.

In her ethnographic study of the EDL Pilkington asserts that the EDL is just such “a single issue anti-Islam movement” (2016, p.16); such a position is also held by Jackson and Feldman who characterise the EDL as “largely driven by a single issue, namely a potent anti-Muslim agenda” (2011, p.5). Such insistence on seeing the EDL as a single issue movement risks the same level of simplistic reductionism as do class based explanations of the movement because it simplifies both the messages that the EDL send out and also assumes that there is homogeneity amongst those who are involved in the EDL. Indeed, Busher’s recent ethnography of the EDL has found that there are multiple routes into EDL activism and he notes that “to some extent, every activists route was unique” (2016, Loc1315). It is therefore difficult to believe that all of the multiple, even unique, journeys into the EDL are solely due to extreme Islamophobia. Only by discussing in detail life histories with EDL members, as this work will do, can we find out the reasons for becoming sympathetic to the EDL’s message.

When we examine the EDL’s emergence we see that it was a specific response to a local event that led to the EDL’s formation; however, it very quickly spread nationally and began to hold large scale demonstrations that appealed to many different sub groups of people who were united through a shared collective identity that brought them into conflict not just with Muslims but with the authorities and counter demonstrators. So whilst the EDL emerged partly as a local response to extremist Islamists it quickly brought together a wide range of groups and represented a plethora of issues and grievances that lead individuals to identify with the English Defence League.

As has been noted previously, the EDL have “tapped into the frustrations and grievances” which arise “from a dense tapestry of social, economic and cultural conditions and neglects” (Treadwell and Garland, 2011, p.626). This assertion is explicitly backed up by Bartlett and Littler’s research (2011) which suggests that

the EDL is not based solely on any one issue; rather it is suggested that the movement provides an umbrella for a multitude of issues and problems, bringing them together through a shared identity in opposition to a shared enemy. Thus, rather than homogeneity there exists a portmanteau of motivations for creating and engaging in the EDL. Indeed, Bartlett and Littler's research, the only large scale quantitative study of the EDL to date, found that 41% of supporters participated in the EDL because of their views on Islam (2011, p.6); whilst this is a high number it suggests that there is plenty of space within the EDL for other concerns and issues. What is important to understand is the process in which Islam came to be attacked by the EDL's discourse and the way in which the EDL was able to unite a range of differences into its unique identity.

What is more, whilst it may appear obvious that the shared enemy is the Muslim 'other', several other enemies are incorporated into the EDL identity narrative and this work will seek to examine the process by which these 'others' are identified; these include government, the left and the police, in addition to Islam. As Bartlett and Littler note, much of the EDL's "vitriol is not directed at the Muslim community, but at the government" (Bartlett and Littler, 2011, p.13). This suggests that the EDL's discourse is more complex than the single issue thesis would assume. Therefore, this work will seek to examine the complex range of issues and problems that coalesce around the EDL identity and the range of 'others' that the EDL identifies.

1.4 Challenging Three Aspects of the Literature

Having thus problematized the dual issues of identity and the single issue status of the EDL we can highlight three specific aspects within the literature that this thesis will seek to shed light upon. This will be done by highlighting these problem issues, suggesting a theoretical approach based upon Laclau's conception of populism and then developing the three aspects into concrete research aims that this work will then focus upon.

The examination of identity issues has demonstrated two key problems, both of which are connected:

- A reductionist class based understanding of the EDL

- A lack of understanding of the process through which the EDL constructs a collective identity

Both of these issues relate to conceptions of collective identity, as has been demonstrated above; studies of the EDL have either focused on class based issues that lead to a reductionist account of the EDL or have lacked a comprehensive understanding of how the EDL constructs a collective identity. Essentially what is lacking in the research of the EDL is an examination of how the EDL appealed to individuals and how it constructed a distinct collective identity. Whilst two recent ethnographic monographs have been published on the EDL, both of which contribute significant knowledge to those studying the EDL, neither attempts to utilise a complex theory driven research agenda. This study, whilst ethnographic, also locates the EDL's identity construction within a theoretical framework which will provide both an ontic and ontological basis for understanding the movement.

Another aspect of the literature that this work seeks to challenge is the assumption:

- That the EDL is a single issue movement that is driven primarily by Islamophobia

By utilising Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory and Laclau's later work on populism this work will demonstrate how the EDL, as a populist movement, has actually identified several 'others' who it seeks to struggle against and that it is driven by a rejection of the current political establishment. This suggests that the EDL is not simply an anti-Islam movement but rather is a populist movement, and by examining the specific demands of the narrators who participated in this study the EDL will be shown in its full complexity rather than being seen merely as a single issue, class driven and one dimensional movement. Ultimately, whilst this work will seek to provide a theory driven analysis of the EDL that will address these three problems, as an ethnography this work should also provide an account of the EDL and those who support it, and this, hopefully, will also inform the reader.

1.5 Towards a Theory of Populism

This work will suggest that 'populism' is the key concept in understanding the English Defence League as it provides us with a certain theoretical relevance

which will help us move forward to properly grapple with the EDL as a social movement. Populism has already been used by researchers to describe parties within what we here term the ‘far right’ family- often used in conjunction with other terms such as ‘radical’. Almost every work on populism begins by decrying the difficulties of the concept and the lack of any consensual understanding on definition. Barr complains that populism is “one of the most elusive concepts in political science” (2009, p.30); whilst Fieschi- writing the editorial for a special edition of the *Journal of Political Ideologies* devoted to the subject of ‘populism’- warns that “Populism has notoriously escaped easy definition” and reminds the reader of the “conundrum in which scholars have found themselves every time they have attempted to define the concept” (Fieschi, 2004, p.235).

The reason that a definition of populism as a concept is so difficult is twofold; firstly, the sheer disparity of parties and movements that have been labelled populist (they almost never self identify with the term), and secondly, the fact that scholars seem unsure as to where populism stands as a discrete entity- does it have its own distinct characteristics or is it always necessarily part of other political concepts or ideologies. Thus on a comparative level we have difficulty with the many phenomena termed populism which range from the historical agricultural movements in the United States, to Latin American movements, through to the most recent use of populism as a term to describe a new breed of far right parties and movements in Western Europe. The sheer scale of populism thus leaves one facing a definitional and conceptual malaise. In addition the problem on the comparative level is replicated (and inextricably linked to) the vagueness of what populism actually constitutes. Writing almost four decades ago Ernesto Laclau summarised the problem that still exists to this day:

‘Populism’ is a concept both elusive and recurrent. Few terms have been so widely used in contemporary political analysis, although few have been defined with less precision. We know intuitively to what we are referring when we call a movement or an ideology populist, but we have the greatest difficulty in translating the intuition into concepts (in Howarth 2014, p.111).

However, despite the oft lack of clarity, utilising populism as a way of understanding the EDL can enable the thesis to better elucidate some of the

problematic areas that have been identified above and can also help overcome the simplistic theoretical bases that have previously been used when studying the EDL. This section will present the main issues and problems within the literature on populism and argue that, whilst there may be merits in other approaches, Laclau's conception of populism provides us with both the most sophisticated theoretical understanding and also a clear research route which will allow us to examine the discourse of the English Defence League.

Perhaps the best way to begin an examination of populism as a concept is to differentiate between the various approaches that students of it have taken. There are several approaches and each contains nuances depending on the theorist, however, they can be usefully divided. There are two central ways of differentiating between different approaches to populism: the first division is between 'content' approaches that see populism as either an ideology or a political style; secondly we can differentiate between approaches that focus on either 'typologies' or 'characteristics' of populism- respectively, the attempt to examine differences between populism in different temporal and spatial locations or alternatively to present 'core' characteristics of populism in a Weberian style of 'ideal type'.

Conovan can be seen as operating primarily within the typological sphere and seeks to present differing types of populism, for example differentiating between 'agrarian' and 'political' populism whilst still acknowledging the impossibility of "find[ing] a single essence behind all established uses of the term" (1981, p.7). This is a problem for any author who attempts to create rigid descriptive terms for populism, even after recognising competing types of populism one is still left having to accept that rather than there always being 'an exception to the rule' the rule is that every populist movement somehow becomes an exception. Another issue also exists when attempting to differentiate between competing types of populism, that whilst there may be no "common core" (Taggart, 2000, p.21) a forced separation can seem arbitrary.

If we turn to the other extreme, we meet scholars who use the term in an all encompassing fashion; this is as a result of seeing populism as a style rather than an ideology. Indeed, Populism has often been used to describe mainstream politicians such as Margaret Thatcher. As Di Tella has noted, "this exceedingly wide usage is not fruitful, because it can end by applying to almost any

politician capable of winning an election” (1997, p.188). Jagers and Walgrave fall into this trap by understanding “populism as a communication style” (2007, p.321). They thus see populism as a “normal political style adopted by all kinds of politicians from all times” (2007, p.323). This is populism understood in the widest possible terms, as any attempt by a political actor to invoke the name of the people, therefore there is no room to understand it on an organisational level or examine its possible ideological or identity content. Whilst Jagers and Walgrave are surely correct that populism has a wide variety of users from a plethora of leaders and groups operating in different spatial and temporal moments, viewing populism in such broad stylistic terms seems to rip out any useful basis for political analysis outside of references to a political leader’s ‘style’.

Carter follows a similar line of understanding when she discusses the problems of using populism to describe parties of the ‘extreme right’. She asserts that:

The term ‘populism’ is not unproblematic...while the term may be used meaningfully to describe or characterize certain parties of the extreme right, it is of little use to denote or identify a separate party family. This is because populism refers to a particular political style or form rather than to a specific political ideology (Carter, 2005, p.23).

There are two important points to note regarding Carter’s assertion. Firstly, very few students of the far right use the term populism as a standalone referent to describe a separate and discrete party family; rather populism is used in conjunction with other referents such as ‘*radical right wing populist*’ (Betz, 1993; Rydgren, 2004); ‘*right wing populism*’ (Swank and Betz, 2003); ‘*Extreme Right Wing Populism*’ (Rydgren, 2004) and ‘*Populist Radical Right*’ (Mudde, 2007) and thus ‘populism’ appears to be one factor or trait within these parties or movements. Secondly, Carter contends in the same fashion as Jagers and Walgrave that populism is a ‘political style’, a way of delivering the messages of the far right rather than a ‘specific political ideology’.

Whilst populism may lend itself to a description of ‘style’ or ‘form’, it has also been suggested that populism can constitute a particular, albeit loose and ‘negative’ ideological base. Taggart has argued that when populism is seen in its broadest and least defined sense it can be confusingly used to denote

phenomena that are mainstream rather than ‘populist’ (Taggart, 2004, p.271). Taggart devotes a book to the subject of populism (in all its various historical forms including the contemporary far right European strand) attempting to tease out its ‘ideal type’ characteristics and begins his discussion by noting that “Populism has many of the attributes of an ideology, but not all of them” (Taggart, 2000, p.1). Taggart then accepts that the variations of populism mean that generalisations are difficult to produce, however, he sets out six key themes that “run through populism” (2000, p.2). Whilst this brief examination is not the place to examine all six of the key themes, the third point is what draws our attention. This is where Taggart envisages “Populism as an ideology lacking core values” (2000, p.6).

Whilst ideology, by its very nature as an academic term, has been contested one can suggest a basic minimum definition that does not require us to embark upon an unnecessary definitional road trip. Martin Seliger provides a useful working definition of ideology as:

a set of ideas by which men posit, explain and justify ends and means of organized social action, irrespective of whether such action aims to preserve, amend, uproot or rebuild a given social order (Seliger, 1976 p.18).

On this relatively standardized reading of ideology core values are clearly fundamental, and so it is important for us to decide whether or not populism contains core values, to determine if we can rightly call it an ideology or if it is something different. At populism’s core is clearly an appeal to ‘the people’ as both having a collective will and a collective nature, thus legitimacy is sought by appeal to the people as a collective entity (see Rydgren, 2004, p.11). However, appeals to such a heterogeneous group is problematic, and as such relies upon a Manichean outlook, defining the people as fundamentally opposed to another manufactured collectivity- often ‘the elites’, thus the people are founded in opposition to another group. Taggart notes that New Populism (that is far right populism):

frequently invokes a notion of ‘the people’ that is characterised more by whom it excludes than by whom it includes...By challenging the legitimacy of others, populists are engaging in the politics of identity construction by

default. They may not know who they are, but they know who they are not (Taggart, 1995, p.37).

We are here left with a suggestion that populism is better seen as ‘identity’ based rather than ‘ideologically’ based. Thus the New Populism- which is defined as new firstly to differentiate it from other historical forms of populism and, secondly and more importantly, because of “the common basis that it shares with New Politics movements such as Green Parties and the new social movements” (Taggart, 1995, p.38) would appear to be more akin to collective identity formulation than strict ideology. In his 1995 article Taggart seems to suggest that this identity formulation is actually part of populism’s ideology that “defines itself in largely negative terms” (1995, p.40) - that is in opposition to an ‘other’, however, by the time of his book in 2000 he seems to have decided that “populism has many of the attributes of an ideology, but not all of them” (Taggart, 2000, p.1). There is then an ambivalence in his work- is populism an ideology with a core concept of identification of the people or is it not an ideology and instead something different?

Stanley attempts to overcome this ambiguity by suggesting that populism is in fact an ideology, albeit a ‘thin’ one; the essence of his argument is that:

The lack of an acknowledged ideology is not the same as the lack of an ideology: the absence of a common history, programme and social base, whilst attesting to populism’s ‘thin’ nature, does not warrant the conclusion that there is no coherence to the collection of concepts that comprise populist ideology” (Stanley, 2008, p.100).

Yet this appears to be a strange argument to pursue, for by saying that populism is a ‘thin’ ideology and not a full or thick ideology Stanley is basically reiterating the ambiguities that Taggart produces. Stanley concludes that populism’s ideology is dedicated to “identifying the people” (2008, p102), thus rather than attempting to understand populism as ideology either ‘almost but not quite’ (like Taggart) or ‘thin’ (like Stanley) we would surely be better off understanding it as a form of identity formulation. Both Stanley and Taggart stress the importance of identity formulation for populism but then try to subsume this into a rather idiosyncratic ideology rather than seeing populism as inherently fixated on the politics of identity.

Abts and Rummens, following Conovan (2002), also use the term ‘thin centred ideology’ to describe populism. They see populism as containing three strands, these being: 1) an “antagonistic relationship between ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’” 2) a restoration of “popular sovereignty” 3) a belief in “the people as a homogeneous unity” (Abts and Rummens, 2007, p.408). These three strands lead the authors to argue that populism is “a thin-centred ideology which advocates the sovereign rule of the people as a homogeneous body” (2007, p.409).

Betz and Johnson suggest a similar thesis when they seek to examine ‘radical right wing populism’, noting that ‘identitarian politics’ is at the heart of the ideology, which “serves primarily as an ideological justification for selective exclusion” (2004, p.318). Yet for Betz and Johnson populism is not being used as a standalone concept, instead it is being used in conjunction with the concept of the ‘radical right’. Thus we have populism’s identity forming ability- making reference to an imagined homogenous collectivity (‘the people’)- taken together with radical right wing formulation of ethnic prejudice and extreme nationalism; packaged like this populism may *become* part of an ideology but it is difficult to see how a priori it is its own ideology. As Taggart has noted, one of the ‘core’ features of populism is its ability to mirror its surroundings (2000, p.2), thus whilst Betz and Johnson may be correct in seeing ‘radical right wing populism’ as containing a distinct ideology- albeit one which sounds more like pure identity politics- this has not shown that populism itself is an ideology.

Returning to Abts and Rummens we see that the ‘populist ideology’ is essentially an identity forming system that is centred on forming an identity of ‘the people’ in opposition to ‘the other’. Abts and Rummens accept that “populism does not provide a comprehensive vision of society” (2007, p.408)- this acknowledgement is why populism is usually cross populated with other more comprehensive ideological systems. Abts and Rummens invoke Freeden’s concept of nationalism which he sees as either ‘thin centred ideology’ or a component of other ideologies. Essentially Abts and Rummens mistake identity formulation for ideology; whilst populism’s appeal to ‘the people’ presents a core element, as a concept this is insufficient to describe it as an ideology, however ‘thin’.

What we can here suggest is that populism can be of the left or right, and will always make appeal to the people as a homogenous entity in an antagonistic relationship with the other and express a desire to achieve success for the people by relocating sovereignty within them. This is an appeal, a sign post for collective action, rather than a fully formulated ideology. As Fieschi suggests, populism “appears as a constitutive part of other ideologies, once it finds a host vessel” (2004, p.238).

To restate the argument so far, we have seen the problems in manufacturing typologies of populism based on time and place, we have also discovered the vagueness of seeing populism simply as a political style- for this allows us to see populism everywhere yet nowhere, stripping it of all analytical use. As far as its ‘content’ as an ideology is concerned it has been suggested that authors who see it as a standalone ideology fall into trouble as it lacks central or core characteristics. In order to resolve this issue other students understand populism as ‘part’ of another ideology, thus positioning populism somewhere in between style and ideology. As for this work’s argument, it has sought to see in populism an identity forming system, one which is not an ideology or a style, so where does that leave our conception of populism?

Essentially all of the approaches to populism that we have briefly examined so far attempt to discern either the ‘content’ of populism or define its typologies or characteristics; both sets of approaches place emphasis on defining the elements of populism, and we have found these to be somewhat confusing. Worsley attempts to move beyond these styles of approaches and suggests that “populism is better regarded as an emphasis, a dimension of political culture in general, not simply as a particular kind of overall ideological system or type of organisation” (in Ionescu and Gellner, 1969, p.245). This begins to move beyond the approaches we have seen above; it thus becomes self defeating to lay out characteristics, to seek to decide if populism is style, organisation or ideology- instead populism is something more profound, its varied use by both movements of the left and right is so because it is in fact a fundamental part of the political identity formation.

We can now move onto Laclau as our point of departure from debates regarding populism, as he appears to take this understanding as his starting point for his conception of populism. Above we attempted to differentiate between different

‘content’ approaches and we noted that populism is not so much an ideology but is rather a style of identity formation. Laclau takes this as a central point when deciding between two different ways of conceptualising populism. The first way of seeing populism is “as the ideology or type of mobilization of an already constituted group- that is, as the expression...of a social reality different from itself” (2007, p.72). This (mainstream) way of approaching populism is problematic as we have seen above. Laclau’s second and chosen way of seeing populism is “as one way of constituting the very unity of the group” (2007, p.73). This suggests a move towards understanding populism as we have suggested above- as identity formation. It is now perhaps necessary to give a brief sketch of Laclau’s conception of populism. This will inevitably only be a briefly sketched working conception, as we will address it in more depth in Chapter Two and also when we seek to pair it with actual research on the English Defence League.

For Laclau the essence of populism is in its articulation and representation of ‘the people’, it is a process of articulation rather than an arena in which we may find specific ideological content or political style. The foundation for this theory is Laclau and Mouffe’s conception of discourse theory - this is not simply discourse understood as language or text but rather:

The ensemble of the phenomena in and through which social production of meaning takes place, an ensemble that constitutes a society as such. The discursive is not, therefore, being conceived as a level nor even as a dimension of the social, but rather as being co-extensive with the social as such (Laclau cited in, Wodak and Meyer, 2016 Loc.2523).

Discourse then is not reducible to ideology; rather discourse so conceived means that every object is constructed through a discourse, every identity becomes a discursive identity- there is no identity external to discourse. What this essentially means for the study of populism is that there can be no separation between ‘organisation’ and ‘ideology’ and that the actual study of populism must be discursive which, we can argue, in its essence is the study of identity constitution. In other words we are studying “the discourses through which these [populist] movements and political identities are constituted” (Stavrakakis, 2004, p.256). By pursuing a discourse analytical strategy we will be able to address the three problem areas that have been highlighted above via

Laclau's theory of populism which will place identity construction centre stage and through this will allow for an analysis of the EDL's 'enemies' and provide an understanding of how the movement emerged and why.

For Laclau the minimum unit of analysis of populism is the "social demand" (Laclau, 2007, p.73); now within the English language 'demand' can mean either 'request' or 'claim' and Laclau uses this dual definition to present the initial constitution of populism. In order for populism to be formed a 'request' must morph into a 'claim', thus if a demand (request) is not satisfied then it becomes a demand (claim), this can then lead to what is termed 'popular demands' whereby separate and discrete demands from separate and discrete individuals against the 'institutional system' (the dominant authority- the 'nation state') become linked and thus they "start to constitute the people" (2007, p.74). So whilst initially the demands (requests) were separate and discrete they have now transitioned into a popular demand (claim) in which 'the people' start to form a common identity. Now rather than being comprised of a plethora of different discrete and competing claims a process of "equivalential articulation" (2007, p.74) takes place; this is essentially a chain of equivalence in which the separate claims of the individuals are now subsumed under the umbrella of 'the people' standing against 'the other'.

Thus, in Arditì's words, "The key operation in this process is the convergence of multiple social demands into a chain of equivalence and the concomitant division of society into two antagonistic camps" (2010, p.489). We must also examine the EDL's discourse to locate the 'empty signifier' because "a popular identity requires the presence of an empty signifier expressing and constituting an equivalential chain" (Brading, 2013, p.18). The next chapter will examine, in detail, discourse theory as it was first articulated by Laclau and Mouffe and will move on to examine Laclau's theory of populism that is based upon this discourse theory.

Conclusion

This chapter has identified three core aspects of the academic literature on the EDL that this work will seek to address. These three aspects include two assumptions made by some students of the movement: firstly, that the EDL is understood as a class based movement and, secondly, that the EDL is a single

issue anti-Islam movement. This chapter has also identified an omission within the literature, this being a lack of focus on the process through which the EDL constructs its collective identity. In order to address these three aspects this work will pursue a discourse theory led examination of the EDL using key tools provided by Laclau's theoretical conception of populism. This chapter has suggested that Laclau's theory of populism provided the best framework for understanding the EDL, as an identitarian social movement. The next chapter will properly introduce discourse theory and Laclau's conception of populism.

Chapter Two - Discourse Theory: Understanding Political Identity

Introduction

In the previous chapter this work highlighted and challenged three core aspects within the academic literature on the English Defence League. To reiterate, these three aspects are:

1. A reductionist class based understanding of the EDL
2. A lack of understanding of the process through which the EDL constructs a collective identity
3. An assumption that the EDL is a single issue movement that is driven primarily by Islamophobia

The last chapter also introduced Laclau's definition of populism and it was explained that Laclau's conception of populism was based upon his and Mouffe's discourse theory. This chapter will firstly highlight the key aspects of discourse theory and then introduce Laclau's theory of populism which is set firmly within the discourse theoretical framework. Finally, the chapter will explain how this theoretical framework will be used to convert the above three key aspects of the English Defence League into practical research aims.

2.1 Laclau and Mouffe's Discourse Theory

The publication, in 1985, of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's '*Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*' made a deep impact upon post-structuralist discourse theory and has served, alongside Michel Foucault's '*The Archaeology of Knowledge*', as one of the seminal texts in discourse theory. As 'post-marxists' Laclau and Mouffe embarked upon a project that culminated in:

A sophisticated synthesis of Structural Marxism and Gramscian political hermeneutics with motifs drawn from post-structuralist philosophy and contemporary theory, [which led to]... the construction of a radical postmodern social theory (Boucher, 2008, p.77).

In essence this radical postmodern theory can be seen as operating in three overlapping strands; these being a theory of ontology, theory of identity construction and a normative theory. Firstly, it provides a social ontology based upon the poststructuralist notion “that discourse constructs the social world in meaning, and that, owing to the fundamental instability of language, meaning can never be permanently fixed” (Jorgenson and Phillips, 2002, p.6). Key arguments and themes that relate to Laclau and Mouffe’s social ontology are: a broad understanding of discourse that goes beyond discourse as simply ‘text’ (see Hansen 2006 in Jeffares p.45); an insistence that there is nothing ‘outside’ of the discourse; a belief in the primacy of politics; the argument of the contingency of the social; and an understanding of the individual as a ‘split subject’ necessarily “engaged in the fruitless pursuit of a complete identity” (Jeffares, 2008, p.60).

Closely related to Laclau and Mouffe’s social ontology is a second strand which encompasses their theory of identity. This theory of identity is premised upon their social ontology but provides a focused and reified theoretical understanding of how identities are constructed through an understanding of politics as “a broad concept that refers to the manner in which we constantly constitute the social in ways that exclude other ways” (Jorgenson and Phillips, 2002, p.36). Thus Laclau and Mouffe’s identity theory provides an understanding of the process through which identities are constructed, reconstructed and contested through arguments and logics such as: equivalence, social antagonism, hegemony and empty signifiers.

The third strand of Laclau and Mouffe’s work on discourse theory is the normative left politics of radical democracy that ‘*Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*’ seeks to advance. Based firmly on Laclau and Mouffe’s post-Marxism their normative political programme seeks to argue for equal importance for all left democratic political struggles. Whilst this normative sphere is a significant part of Laclau and Mouffe’s overall project this work will focus on the first two spheres in order to develop a theoretical framework and analytical strategy.

For Laclau and Mouffe, discourse is not simply ‘text’ or ‘language’ but rather it is “the ensemble of the phenomena in and through which social production of meaning takes place, an ensemble that constitutes a society as such”(Laclau cited in, Wodak and Meyer, 2016 Loc.2523). This highlights an important ontological assumption that (Laclau and Mouffe’s) discourse theory is based upon; namely that discourse is the only way that meaning can be constructed

within society and because of this discourse “is not, therefore, being conceived as a level nor even as a dimension of the social, but rather as being co-extensive with the social” (Laclau, cited in, Wodak and Meyer, 2016 Loc.2523). Whilst Laclau and Mouffe’s ontological position does not reject material reality it does reject the possibility that material reality can be understood in any way other than through discourse and thus, because “all forms of social practice takes place against a background of historically specific discourses” (Torfing, 2005, p.14), there is no possibility of objective social facts. However, there is no dualism between the material and the discursive because as noted above discourse is co-extensive with the social and it is therefore not possible to distinguish between the discursive and non-discursive realms. This ontological positioning forces an acknowledgement of the specificity of social facts, knowledge and truth which are only imbued with meaning through specific temporal and spatial discourses. Facts that superficially appear to be outside of a specific discourse are in actuality lying within another discursive order- coming from another discourse; there is nothing outside of the discursive, meaning can only be constructed within and through discourse and different discourses will construct different patterns of meanings.

The insistence that there is nothing outside of discourse and the related rejection of the objectivity of social facts stems from Laclau and Mouffe moving beyond Gramscian post Marxism and, when combined with the post-Saussurian linguistics that they also pursue, it leads to a position that asserts the contingency of the social. Gramsci is a figure of vital importance for understanding the social ontology of Laclau and Mouffe for it was Gramsci (1971) who first sought to move beyond the historical materialism of Classical Marxism that argued that consciousness is materially determined by the economic base. Instead, Gramsci sought to soften this over determinism in order to allow for the possibility that groups (particularly the working class) could recognise their oppressive conditions in society and therefore attempt a struggle against it. Gramsci’s post-Marxism forms the initial basis of Laclau and Mouffe’s *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985) but they then seek to further manoeuvre beyond Gramsci’s position and obliterate any notion of a division between base and superstructure. This rejection of the division between base and superstructure directly leads to a rejection of an a-priori objective material reality or, to relate it specifically to Classical Marxism, a rejection that the base can divide classes into determined historical actors. Instead Laclau and Mouffe argue for the primacy of politics, with politics being the process through which

actors and groups of actors struggle to articulate meanings and organise the social (see Jorgenson and Phillips, 2002, p.36).

It is because of this positioning that Laclau and Mouffe argue that the social world is contingent, there is no inevitable or a-priori outcome or fact because for Laclau and Mouffe all meaning is constructed through discourses and a plethora of discourses can operate at any one temporal moment thus providing any number of possibilities. This also leads to the final element of discourse theory's social ontology- the split subject. In their post-structuralist opposition to Saussurean linguistics Laclau and Mouffe reject the notion that meanings can be permanently and definitively fixed. For Saussure signs, which are elements that unite together a signifier (the sound or image) that represents the signified (the concept), only accrue meaning through their relational position to other signs (see Howarth, 2000, p.18). The linguistic system that these signs occupy is, however, closed. It is only through a closed system of signs that each sign can exert meaning through its relationship to other signs. Therefore the structure was always understood as closed and thus as complete; however, later post-structural discourse theory rooted within social constructionism has dismissed the notion of closed and completed structures. Laclau and Mouffe thus proceed from this post-structuralist conception that draws on Saussurean linguistics but which simultaneously rejects its notion of the completeness of a discourse. Instead it is acknowledged that "discourse constructs the social world in meaning, and that, owing to the fundamental instability of language, meaning can never be fixed" (Jorgensen and Phillips, 2002, p.6).

Because meaning can never be completely fixed it stands that it is also impossible to achieve a full identity; no matter how rigorously agents may try to achieve this desired full identity the contingent nature of the social prevents this desire. Therefore Torfing notes that "the subject always emerges as a split subject that might attempt to reconstruct a full identity through acts of identification" (Torfing in Howarth and Torfing, 2005, p.16) however, this full identity through complete closure is never actually realisable. In taking this position Laclau and Mouffe reject the economic determinism that is inherent within Althusser's conception of interpellation which suggests that the economic base can determine social relations (see Jorgenson and Phillips, 2002, p.41). For Laclau and Mouffe no single discourse can have a strong enough hold over a subject for it to become the only discourse operating on that subject. Instead subjects are interpellated by many competing discourses, each one

providing a potentially different identity for the agent. However, whilst it may be impossible for any agent to achieve a full identity through closure of a specific discourse, agents should be seen as operating under the assumption that Saussure was correct and that a system can become completely closed and therefore a full identity attained. An agent may attempt to pursue this impossible yet desirable full identity by “identifying itself with the promise of fullness offered by different political projects” (Torfing in Howarth and Torfing, 2005, p.17).

We have thus far examined the social ontology of Laclau and Mouffe’s discourse theory and have highlighted the key arguments and themes that make up this social ontology. To summarise, for Laclau and Mouffe there can be nothing outside of discourse and discourse is understood as being constitutive of society. Based upon post Marxist and post structuralist approaches discourse theory rejects crude economic determinism in favour of the primacy of politics which is the struggle to achieve meaning through discourse and, because of this, there is a stress upon the contingency of society and the conception of the split subject. Now that discourse theory’s ontological premises have been elucidated this chapter will focus on the second sphere of discourse theory- the theory of political identity which provides several key arguments and logics that articulate the way in which identity is constructed, contested, reconstructed or collapsed.

2.2 Theorising Political Identity

As has been noted above, Laclau and Mouffe’s discourse theory rejects the economic determinism of Althusser (1969), however, they do utilise his conception of ‘subject positions’ which suggests that agents are non-autonomous as opposed to the enlightenment notion of the subject as autonomous and inherently self-conscious. But, importantly for Laclau and Mouffe, owing to their social ontology the subject is also seen as fragmented and never complete due to the fact that a subject is positioned within many different competing discourses at any one time and owing to the ontological fact that no discourse can ever be complete and closed. Because of this and also because of Laclau and Mouffe’s extensive and detailed concepts and logics Glasze has argued that “discourse theory, as conceptualised by Laclau and Mouffe, is especially fruitful for conceiving the constitution of identities” (2007, p.661).

For Laclau and Mouffe identities are constructed through discursive struggles that provide meaning and understanding. This therefore stresses the primacy of politics because due to the contingency and undecidability of the social, political struggles seek to reproduce or change meanings of specific discourses (see Jorgenson and Phillips, 2002, p.36). Discourses thus struggle to be hegemonic, as Torfing notes:

discourse is constructed in and through *hegemonic struggles* that aim to establish a political and moral-intellectual leadership through the articulation of meaning and identity (Torfing in Howarth and Torfing, 2005, p.15).

Even more importantly for understanding identity, political acts are acts that exclude other possible ways of understanding, organising or identifying with alternative positions. A ‘hegemonic struggle’ is therefore the “exemplary form of political practice” (Howarth, 2000, p.109) which seeks to construct systems of meaning through articulations that attempt to provide meaning and identity. Torfing notes that “articulations that manage to provide a credible principle upon which to read past, present, and future events, and capture people’s hearts and minds, become hegemonic” (Torfing in Howarth and Torfing, 2005, p.15). We can thus understand hegemonic struggles as a political process through which a discourse can come to be seen as credible and therefore taken-for-granted and which by becoming so reduces the possibility for other alternative discourses by excluding them.

However, following from Laclau and Mouffe’s ontological position we know that no discourse (and therefore identity) can ever be completely full or closed and because of this there necessarily exists ‘social antagonism’. Because the social ontology of discourse theory holds that it is impossible for a discourse, and therefore an identity, to be complete social antagonism serves to provide an antagonistic ‘other’ who is deemed responsible for ‘blocking’ this complete identity; the ‘other’ is thus held responsible for the impossibility of achieving a full identity. As Howarth notes:

social antagonisms occur because social agents are *unable* to attain their identities (and therefore their interests), and because they construct an ‘enemy’ who is deemed responsible for this failure (Howarth, 2000, p.105).

This leads to an important point that must here be stressed, the ‘other’ who is formed through social antagonism is not simply seen as somehow different but is instead seen as a threat, as an enemy. Social antagonism is inevitable because it demonstrates the limits of a discourse or, as Torfing notes, “we have to look for something outside the discourse to account for its limits” (Torfing in Howarth and Torfing, 2005, p.15). A discourse can never be fully sutured and thus there must be something ‘outside’ of the discourse that cannot be positively incorporated into the discourse - the boundary between the discourse and its outside is displayed in social antagonism that “stabilizes the discursive system while, at the same time, preventing its ultimate closure” (Torfing in Howarth and Torfing, 2005, p.15). In terms of identity, what this means is that identity is always formed in opposition to an ‘other’ that is excluded from the discourse.

We have thus far seen how discourses can become taken-for-granted through the political act of hegemonic struggle which seeks to fix meaning. However, because of the impossibility of a discourse ever being fully closed, social antagonism is always a feature of identity construction. Furthermore, no discourse will last in perpetuity, instead discourses will face challenges and can collapse through a process of dislocation. Torfing states that “a stable hegemonic discourse becomes *dislocated* when it is confronted by new events that it cannot explain, represent, or in other ways domesticate” (Torfing in Howarth and Torfing, 2005, p.16). When a discourse can no longer provide coherent meanings, there will be new hegemonic struggles via the process of politics that will lead to new discourses and thus new social antagonisms and new identities.

Discourse theory thus provides a diachronic conception of how meanings and, more importantly for this work, identities can change over a certain temporal period; as one discourse is dislocated a new political struggle for the hegemony of a new discourse takes place. Whilst events that lead to dislocation are traumatic, in that identities are challenged, dislocation is also a productive event; as Laclau himself observes, “if on the one hand they [events that lead to dislocation] threaten identities, on the other, they are the foundation on which new identities are constituted” (1990, p.36). It is therefore through dislocation that existing discourses either collapse to be replaced by completely new discourses that present new meanings, understandings and identities or are reconstructed with modified meanings, understandings and identities. It is also important to note that for Laclau and Mouffe subjects are always over

determined, that is to say that the individual is positioned in different ways within different discourses with this being due to the fact that discourses are always contingent (Jorgensen and Phillips, 2002, p.41).

It should by this stage be clear that for Laclau and Mouffe there are no pre-determined identities; in order to strike out from Marxist class determinism, discourse theory forces us to “confront the phenomenon of a potentially endless chain of social actors forming their identities around notions other than class” (Critchley and Marchart, 2008, p.3). As we have seen above, antagonism is the key to identity formation and the logic of equivalence is, in turn, key to understanding antagonism. Antagonism represents the purely negative outside of a discourse that cannot be represented positively within the discourse (see Critchley and Marchart, 2008, p.4; and Howarth, 2000, p.106); and equivalence serves to negate the differences between various elements that are seen as threatening so that all they have in common is that they pose a threat to the discourse. In terms of identity this means that the differences between all ‘others’ (those who threaten the discourse) is made equivalent, they are simplified as a threatening other and the differences between these ‘others’ is obliterated. However, the logic of equivalence can also work within a discourse - obliterating the differences within a discourse and thus can simplify identities of both ‘us’ (within the discourse) and ‘them’ (‘others’ who threaten the discourse).

For example in November 2001, as the discourse surrounding the ‘War on Terror’ was in its nascent stages, George Bush declared to the World “You’re either with us or against us in the fight against terror” (Voice of America Online Source, 21st September 2001). This created a chain of equivalence that simplified the differences between both those within (fighting against terrorism) and those without (supporters of terrorism). Rosa Burgos has also developed the logic of equivalence to explain how disparate groups in revolutionary Mexico linked together to form a “sense of belonging” (in Howarth et al, 2000, p.90) due to the simplification of the social-scape and the reduction of identities into ‘the people’ and ‘the oppressors’.

An historical example may here serve to further elucidate this point. In 1642, with the first ebullitions that led to the beginnings of the English Civil War, it was not immediately clear that there were just two sides, Royal or Parliamentary, to choose between. As Purkiss has noted, in the early months of the Civil War “there was room for many sides” (2006, p.146), it was only

through a process of equivalence that the terms ‘Royalist’ or ‘Parliamentarian’ began to stand in for a variety of different positions and identities and as the discourse of ‘Civil War’ emerged the social-scape, and therefore political identities, became split between these two antagonistic poles that simplified identities.

The logic of equivalence can be either progressive or regressive but “a project principally employing the logic of equivalence seeks to divide the social space by condensing meanings around two antagonistic poles” (Howarth, 2000, p.107), as happened in the English Civil War. Therefore we can see how multiple differential identities can be brought together or reduced through a chain of equivalence, or put another way, “The differential character of social identities collapses as they become inscribed in chains of equivalence that construct them in terms of a certain ‘sameness’” (Torfing, 1999, p.124).

The logic of difference, on the other hand, serves to incorporate and recognise differential identities within a discourse and at the frontiers of a discourse. As Howarth explains, the logic of difference “attempts to displace and weaken antagonisms, while endeavouring to relegate division to the margins of society” (Howarth, 2000, p.107). Whilst it should by now be clear that antagonism is always a presence, the logic of difference, in contradistinction to the logic of equivalence, prevents the simplification of identities around two antagonistic poles of ‘us’ and ‘them’. So whilst the logic of equivalence serves to negate difference and divide the social-scape into ‘us’ (‘Royalist’, ‘freedom fighter’ or ‘hardworking families’) and ‘them’ (‘Parliamentarian’, ‘terrorists’ and ‘benefit scroungers’), the logic of difference allows for the differential identities to be recognised as different rather than simplified or made equivalent.

The third logic is that of fantasy, which is, as Jeffares notes, “about symbolising a complete and desirable fullness and certainty devoid of any threat” (2008, p.52). This logic relates back to the ontological understandings that we looked at in the beginning of this chapter; because of the impossibility of a full identity and the uncertainty inherent within the split subject, fantasy refers to the imagined, fantasised fullness that is always sought but can never be achieved. An imagined completeness and fullness can be sought through an ‘empty signifier’ which stands in for various identities and demands and which can give the illusion of a full and complete identity by creating chains of equivalence. It is to the role of ‘empty signifiers’ that we will now turn our attention.

As we have seen, the construction of a discourse leads to certain meanings becoming fixed (albeit never permanently) whilst other possible meanings are excluded; therefore a discourse reduces possibilities. Whilst there is never any possibility of complete closure “empty signifiers will tend to function as nodal points for the partial fixation of meaning” (Torfinn in Howarth and Torfinn, 2005, p.14); a nodal point has no meaning in and of itself but instead acquires meaning via its positioning to other signs within the discourse. Žižek has described the nodal point as an “empty signifier, a pure signifier without the signified” (1989, p.97).

Whilst there can be confusion regarding the exact difference between the terms ‘nodal point’ and ‘empty signifier’ it is most accurate to see a nodal point as “the site of a particular discursive concentration” (Reyes in Howarth and Torfinn, 2005, p.242) and the empty signifier as the representation of the perfect yet impossible to achieve identity of the group; thus a nodal point refers to a point of crystallisation within a discourse and an empty signifier represents the discourse as that which is lacking or absent. Nodal points that become empty of their contents can thus stand in for the entirety of the discourse - they unify a discourse because of their emptiness. The empty signifier represents the absence or lack at the centre of a discourse and is therefore “present as that which is absent; it becomes an empty signifier, as the signifier of this absence” (Laclau, 1996, p.44). Yet, the empty signifier still retains some partial meaning but this meaning is reduced as it comes to be a universal representation of particular aspects of a discourse.

The importance of the empty signifier highlights the ontological understanding of the primacy of politics because politics is the process by which a struggle takes place to fix meaning through the attempt to fill the emptiness at the centre of the discourse. This is of course impossible; however, political projects still strive to achieve exactly this. In essence we can understand this as the attempt to construct a full essential identity which is destined to fail and which because of this impossibility produces antagonisms which are understood by actors as the “symbol of my non being” (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, p.125); every identity is therefore premised upon an antagonistic relationship with ‘the other’.

This chapter has so far sought to highlight the key aspects of Laclau and Mouffe’s discourse theory. In this section we have outlined the key concepts that relate to Laclau and Mouffe’s theory of identity. In the next section we will examine Laclau’s theory of populism that is inextricably linked to discourse

theory. Once Laclau's conception of populism has been explained, the final section of this chapter will set out how these various theoretical conceptions will be used in this work's discourse analysis.

2.3 Laclau on Populism: Utilising Discourse Theory

Laclau's theoretical understanding of populism (see *On Populist Reason*, 2005) is embedded within his and Mouffe's discourse theory; for Laclau populism is understood "as one way of constituting the very unity of the group" (2007, p.73). This suggests a conception of populism as (as was suggested in the previous chapter) identity formation. For Laclau the essence of populism is in its articulation of 'the people', it is thus a process of articulation rather than an arena in which we may find specific ideological content or political style. The foundation for this theory lies in the conception of discourse that was outlined in the sections above. To reiterate, this defines discourse as:

The ensemble of the phenomena in and through which social production of meaning takes place, an ensemble that constitutes a society as such. The discursive is not, therefore, being conceived as a level nor even as a dimension of the social, but rather as being co-extensive with the social as such (Laclau cited in, Wodak and Meyer, 2016 Loc.2523).

What this essentially means is that the actual study of populism must be discursive which in essence is the study of identity construction. In other words we are studying "the discourses through which these [populist] movements and political identities are constituted" (Stavrakakis, 2004, p.256). We now need to describe precisely how 'the people' come to be identified and we will here make reference to some of the key concepts that were set out above in addition to introducing a new analytical category - social demands. For Laclau the minimum unit for the analysis of populism is the "social demand" (Laclau, 2007, p.73); now within the English language 'demand' can mean either 'request' or 'claim' and Laclau uses this dual definition to present the initial constitution of populism. In order for populism to be formed a 'request' must morph into a 'claim'; thus if a demand (request) is not satisfied punctually then

it becomes a demand (claim), this can then lead to what is termed ‘popular demands’ whereby separate and discrete demands from separate and discrete individuals against the ‘institutional system’ (the dominant authority- the ‘nation state’) become linked and thus they “start to constitute the people” (2007, p.74).

So whilst initially the demands (requests) were separate and discrete they have now transitioned into a popular demand (claim) in which ‘the people’ start to form a common identity – the common identity being that their demands are going punctually unfulfilled. Thus, rather than being comprised of a plethora of different discrete and competing individuals making discrete and individual demands a process of “equivalential articulation” (Laclau, 2007, p.74) or, as described above, a chain of equivalence emerges. This obliterates the difference between competing claims and links them together as equivalent demands via a chain of equivalence. These claims become represented by an empty signifier that represents the diverse demands and because this empty signifier is standing in for or representing so many competing demands it necessarily loses its particularity and thus becomes emptied of its original meaning.

Thus we see an emergence of the ‘empty signifier’ that stands in for diverse competing demands, for example ‘the workers’, ‘the English’ or ‘the citizens’ are simplified into one single identity whose demands are going unfulfilled and are thus in an antagonistic relationship with ‘the other’, who are those that are being held responsible for the non fulfilment of these demands. As Arditì puts it, “the key operation in this process is the convergence of multiple social demands into a chain of equivalence and the concomitant division of society into two antagonistic camps” (2010, p.489). We here see how a political hegemonic struggle takes place to ‘fix’ the discourse around a specific identity via the logic of equivalence and social antagonism.

The logic of equivalence is therefore key to the formation of a populist identity; as Stavrakakis notes, the logic of equivalence:

reduces the number of positions that can be combined in a discourse, leading to a paratactical division of the political space that simplifies political struggle into an antagonism between ‘us’ and ‘them’, good and evil (Stavrakakis, 2004, p.257).

The chain of equivalence links up separate individual claims and leads to a formulation of an identity of ‘the people’ and thus an antagonistic split between ‘us’ and ‘them’; both of whose identities are simplified through this process of equivalence. In other words the differences between individuals within these two identities are obliterated. This equivalency necessarily involves “the drawing of an antagonistic frontier” (Laclau, 2007, p.78) between those identified as ‘the people’ and those identified as ‘the other’; thus an antagonistic frontier between the two groups has come into existence but, as we have noted above, this antagonism alone is not the only way that identity is formed and perpetuated.

Through the process of hegemony floating signifiers, whose meanings are yet to be articulated, become imbued with meaning, thus becoming empty signifiers that act as the centre of the discourse- collecting the differences and forming them into a discourse of unity (or, we may say, an identity). In essence the empty signifiers “represents the pure and perfect but impossible identity of the community, and defines an antagonistic boundary defining their limits- i.e. excluding the fundamentally different “other”” (Glasze, 2007, p.662).

The empty signifier has to be drastically emptied in order to absorb the particularities within the discourse and allow these particularities to form an equivalence. In populism this empty signifier thus comes to represent all of the diverse demands that have been unfulfilled; ‘the people’ are now constituted into a discourse at the centre of which is an empty signifier(s) that takes the place of their discrete and separate individual demands and unites them within an antagonistic identity against an ‘other’. We therefore see the formation of a group identity. It is here important to highlight the fact that:

group formation is to be understood as a reduction of possibilities. People are constituted as groups through a process by which some possibilities of identification are put forward as relevant whilst others are ignored (Jorgenson and Philips, 2002, p.44).

Thus the formation of a group leads to some identities becoming realised whilst other are closed off. Therefore populism leads to the construction of a simplified identity at the expense of other possible identities. It is important to

note that for Laclau, on a normative level, populism is inherently linked to democracy, for democratic politics necessitates the formation of ‘the people’ as an identity which is constructed via empty signifiers and that exists in an antagonistic relationship to an ‘other’. Because of the contingency of discourse populism can be regressive as well as progressive. Now that the core arguments and logics of discourse theory have been rendered explicit and linked to the theory of populism it is now appropriate to explain exactly how these concepts will be utilised in this work.

2.4 From Discourse Theory to Discourse Analysis

The discussion within this chapter has so far been concerned with the theoretical components of Laclau and Mouffe’s discourse theory and Laclau’s conception of populism that is based upon discourse theory. It is at this abstract theoretical level that discourse theory as articulated by Laclau and Mouffe operates upon. This thesis, however, seeks to utilise this complex theory in order to understand empirical data and this requires that the discussion is now moved from the theoretical level to the specific empirical level. This section will explain how this work has undertaken a discourse analysis based upon the theory of Laclau and Mouffe and will provide a stepping stone for the following methodology chapter that will discuss in detail exactly how and by what means the data was collected.

In general terms, the success of any discourse analysis lies in “the degree to which its accounts provide plausible and convincing explanations of carefully problematised phenomena for the community of social scientists” (Howarth and Stavrakakis in Howarth et al, 2000, p.7). Empirical phenomena should not, however, be forced into specific theoretical components of discourse theory, rather, the theory should allow for a process of (discourse) analysis that provides rich and detailed understandings of specific phenomena.

By utilising discourse theory and its key concepts and operationalising these in conjunction with the theory of populism, this work can present an understanding of the discourse and identity of the EDL as a discrete phenomenon that emerged in a specific temporal period and that was shaped by a specific discursive context. What follows is an outline of the three research aims of this project and these aims are linked to the three unsatisfactory aspects within the current academic literature that were identified and challenged in the last chapter. This

will be achieved through an ethnographic study of the EDL that will provide an analysis of the EDL's discourse through the prism of discourse theory. These research aims are:

1) Investigate the preconditions that led to the emergence of the EDL as a populist movement

By making reference to Laclau's conception of populism this work will seek to analyse the unfulfilled demands that are a necessary factor for the emergence of the EDL as a populist movement. As noted above, for discourse theory the social is contingent, discourses can lead to different constructions and therefore by examining the initial demands that led to the formation of the EDL we are better positioned to understand why it took its specific form. This is important because "groups are not socially predetermined, they do not exist until they are constituted in discourse" (Jorgensen and Phillips, 2002, p.45) and it is therefore vital that we analyse the initial unfulfilled demands.

The concept of dislocation will also be utilised in order to examine the crisis event that led to the EDL's emergence because whilst unfulfilled demands are a necessary precondition for the emergence of a populist movement, the EDL also formed in 2009 in Luton because of a specific event, namely the abuse of British soldiers by a small group of radical Islamists. It will be demonstrated that this was a crisis point that dislocated previously held understandings and led to a space existing in which the EDL could emerge and present a new discursive construction of events. By examining the emergence of the EDL through unfulfilled demands and dislocation it will be demonstrated that the EDL was not simply an inevitable outcome of class based marginalisation and that, furthermore, EDL members had a plurality of complaints and issues and were not simply anti-Islamic.

2) Examine how the EDL discourse utilised equivalence and antagonism to construct the 'other'

Rather than assuming that the EDL is solely an anti-Islam movement, this research aim will seek to examine the processes of equivalence and antagonism that existed within the EDL discourse. By doing this, the thesis will identify all of the 'others' that exist within the EDL's discourse and will be able to track the way in which this process occurred and what effect it had on the EDL's identity and collective action.

We can also highlight how the EDL as a populist movement simplifies the social-scape between ‘us’ and ‘other’; it can be shown how differences within the EDL identity are obliterated or equalised and how the identity of the ‘other’ is also simplified. We are therefore able to sketch out the contours of how the EDL’s discourse divides society into two antagonistic camps made up of a range of ‘others’ such as Muslims, government, the left and the police.

As has been suggested above, the EDL identity was possible because of the failure, or dislocation, of other previous identities (Howarth and Stavrakakis, in Howarth et al, 2000, p.13). It is also important because, in discourse theory, the ‘subject’ has no fixed prior identity and thus acts of identification are required (Laclau, 1990, p.44) and it is in these acts of identification that individuals make decisions; as Laclau asserts, “Every time I decide, if a decision is possible, I invent the who” (1996, p.57). This specific research aim allows a focus on the process by which the EDL’s discourse constructed its specific social antagonism and will thus shed light on the EDL’s construction of its collective identity, something that was shown in chapter One to be under theorised within the literature and will also show how the EDL was able to incorporate a range of identities within its collective identity, for example, the EDL LGBT division, Sikh division and Jewish division.

3) Identify the empty signifier that produced equivalence within the EDL identity and identify what impact this empty signifier has on the EDL collective identity

As was noted above, empty signifiers play a crucial role in representing discrete demands and they thus act to bind a discourse together. Empty signifiers serve to promote a “loaded notion as a universal panacea to the fundamental lack” (Reyes in Howarth and Torfing, 2005, p.244) that exists within a given discourse because of the impossibility of achieving a full discursive closure and thus a full identity. It is the suggestion of this thesis that ‘Victim(s)’ acted as the empty signifier which represented the many different unfulfilled demands of the many different individuals who identify with the EDL and which provided the discourse with a clear ‘us’ and ‘them’ antagonism. This particular investigation allows for an understanding of how ‘victim(s)’ constructed and maintained the specific EDL identity. It also challenges the assumption that the EDL is driven solely by a pre-existing strain of Islamophobia. Instead by conducting an analysis of the empty signifier we can see how ‘Islam’ and

‘Muslims’ are constructed as an antagonistic ‘other’ through the EDL’s unique identity construction rather than simply viewing the EDL as being the sum total of its member’s pre-existing Islamophobia.

Together these three research aims provide a holistic analysis of the EDL over a temporal period that begins with the emergence of the EDL in 2009 and continues until the end of this thesis’s research in 2014. This approach will allow for an understanding of how the EDL came into existence as a specific populist movement with a specific identity, it will shed light on why the individual narrators were susceptible to its message and will examine how the EDL’s collective identity was constructed and reinforced with reference to antagonism, equivalence and empty signifiers. It is now necessary to examine exactly how this work went about investigating and analysing these specific areas. This is of paramount importance because whilst Laclau and Mouffe set out a detailed theoretical framework their work is recalcitrant when it comes to the use of this theoretical framework for understanding empirical everyday events (Jorgensen and Phillips, 2002, p.49).

Whilst the next chapter will deal with specifics of data collection and methodology, it is here necessary to point out the three data strands that provided ethnographic empirical material that was analysed. Firstly, there was an observation of EDL national demonstrations during a period of eighteen months that allowed for data to be collected from the signs, chants, speeches and micro conversations that occurred during EDL demonstrations and meetings. In terms of discourse theory it is not only speech acts that matter, but also dress, signs and even the layout of demonstrations that can all be ‘read’ and analysed. Secondly, there were a total of twenty six narrative interviews with nine members of the English Defence League. These interviews were open ended, unstructured and detailed and allowed for rich life history accounts of individual narrators which allowed for an exploration of what their concerns were prior to joining the EDL, what they saw as their EDL identity, how they understood the ‘others’ and how the empty signifier of ‘victim(s)’ shaped their understandings of themselves, the EDL and their perceived enemy. Thirdly, this project also examined secondary sources such as EDL articles, previously published EDL speeches and media articles on the EDL. In combination these three data streams have provided sufficient detail for the above three areas to be investigated. As was set out above, there are three discrete yet inter-related research aims and these relate to four key components of discourse theory and

Laclau's theory of populism, these are: 'unfulfilled demands', 'equivalence', 'antagonism' and 'empty signifier' and it must now be shown how each one of these specific elements were utilised in the analysis of the data.

Demands are Laclau's unit of analysis for theorising populism. Demands are a smaller analytical unit than the group and each demand contains a distinctive self but also contains the potential to be linked with other unsatisfied demands if these demands can all be constructed as equivalent in respect that they all stand in opposition to a common enemy or 'other' (Ferrandez in Ferrandez, 2014, p.134). In analytical terms this means that the study is provided with a tool for examining the initial issues that acted as 'drivers' for the emergence of the EDL. As was noted in Chapter One, the literature on the EDL often presents the movement as inevitable; for example Garland and Treadwell (2011) portray the movement as an almost inevitable product of working class marginalisation. By introducing demands as a unit of analysis this work can actually demonstrate that rather than being inevitable, the EDL was one possible response to numerous unfulfilled demands. Furthermore, the suggestion that the EDL is simply an anti-Islamic movement is somewhat complicated by the range of demands provided. Also, by examining specific demands we have a unit of analysis that operates on the individual level and thus provides an opportunity to move beyond simply examining the group level (for example, the 'working class').

By utilising demands as a unit of analysis the data collection aspect of this study has a specific initial target to focus upon. During the narrative interviews there was an initial chronological focus on exactly what drew someone to see the EDL as a viable action. In particular, the narrative interviews' first focus was to ask the individuals who took part in the narrative interviews to describe the problems or issues or complaints that they had in their lives prior to realizing their desire to join the EDL. By focusing on these 'demands', be they about a lack of job opportunity, lack of social housing, disrespect shown to British service personnel, gay rights or an increase in diversity in the local area there is an ability to understand what drives individuals into making the specific decision to join the EDL. Whilst the data for the analysis of specific demands was drawn most heavily from the narrative interviews data was also taken from second hand sources, such as EDL speeches and online articles from the EDL website and media material, in order to create a backdrop against which the

specific demands of the nine individuals who took part in the narrative interviews could be analysed against and contextualised within.

By speaking in detail to the individuals included in this study it was possible to identify initial demands as a unit of analysis and to gain an appreciation of just how significant each demand was to each individual. In a study of Occupy Wall Street, Husted, who utilised Laclau's theory of populism, was able to identify specific individual demands and then examine their frequency within the discourse (Husted in Uldam and Vestergaard, 2015, pp.153-173). Whilst Husted's study was based in the online arena, specifically Facebook comments that prevented follow up questions, the method of interviewing used in this study allowed for added clarity because follow up questions could be asked and individuals could clearly state their key demands and whether or not they had been punctually fulfilled by telling their stories in depth and detail.

For Laclau populism requires a specific social logic for its formation and this is the logic of equivalence. Laclau states that the logic of equivalence is where "all the demands, in spite of their differential character, tend to reaggregate themselves forming what we will call an equivalential chain" (Laclau in Panizza, 2005, p.37). This of course only happens when the individual demands are not punctually satisfied. Having gathered the initial demands and having ascertained that as far as the individuals who made them are concerned these demands remained unfulfilled, this work can move on to explicitly highlight this chain of equivalence and thereby elucidate the EDL's unique collective identity.

This shift of analysis allows for an understanding of exactly how the English Defence League draws together different individuals with different concerns, from gay rights activists to those concerned with the lack of social housing. In the first chapter it was argued that studies of the EDL that attempt to explain the group in terms of class or single issues miss the variety of different individuals who make up the movement. By highlighting the chains of equivalence it is possible to understand how the EDL as a movement are able to bring together a diverse mix of individuals and sub-groups with differing concerns whilst at the same time maintaining a distinct collective EDL identity. In order to collect data at the group level it was necessary to observe EDL demonstrations and other meetings in order to highlight how, through the logic of equivalence, the EDL was able to construct a specific identity of 'us' in an antagonistic relationship to 'them' whilst continuing to incorporate many different individual concerns into the movement. Whilst the EDL clearly constructed Muslims as an antagonistic

other, this was only part of the story, and by examining antagonism we can highlight how the EDL constructs several dangerous ‘others’, including government, the police and left wing counter demonstrators.

Demonstration days were particularly interesting when analysed within the framework of equivalence and antagonism. There were the pink signs of the EDL LGBT Division held alongside the Star of David held by members of the Jewish Division who were engaged in the same demonstration as members of the football ‘casuals’ who were waving their England flags. They were all there to struggle against a perceived enemy ‘other’. By conducting participant observation of the EDL demonstrations and listening to the speeches that took centre stage it was possible to observe first hand, on an empirical level, how the logic of equivalence allowed these specific differential identities to coalesce around one movement that sought to represent all the demands and constructed a social antagonism with the ‘other’. This made it possible to analyse the process in which the EDL constructed a collective identity in opposition to an antagonistic ‘other’ whose identity was also simplified.

By examining the group through observation it is possible therefore to provide a specific analysis of the way in which the EDL represents itself through words, signs and actions. However, populist demands are not only represented by human representatives (Husted in Uldam and Vestergaard, 2015, pp.153-173) during demonstrations and speeches. The demands and the movement’s identity as a whole is also represented by an empty signifier. An empty signifier “can be an idea, an image, a word, or a phrase in a political discourse” (Kumar, 2014, p.9) that acts as a representation of all of the particularistic demands and thus operates on the universal level (Laclau, 2007, p.36), having been emptied of any particular meaning. In terms of identifying possible empty signifiers one should expect that they be present and prominent within the data gathered from the narrative interviews, observation and secondary data (published speeches, social media and EDL website articles).

This research project began with several possible ‘empty signifiers’ in mind, including ‘victim(s)’, ‘England’ and ‘defence’ because it was based on an earlier M.A. dissertation in which the author also spoke to members of the EDL and observed EDL collective activities and had therefore gained a firsthand perspective on the movement. It was suspected that ‘victim’ and ‘England’ were possible candidates and by doing background readings of previously released

EDL speeches and articles these two ideas began to become the most significant candidates. ‘Victim(s)’ also appeared in EDL website articles and social media and was also a part of a general narrative that the EDL constructed. Whilst ‘victim(s)’ has not featured heavily in other academic studies, this study has sought to argue its core relevance to the EDL discourse. After the initial interviews with each individual it was possible to probe further and deeper in subsequent interviews and to discuss ‘victims(s)’ with the narrators.

Whilst it is possible to identify potential empty signifiers by observing the group and reading/listening to articles/speeches these methods only allow for a thin analysis of the role of the empty signifiers – insofar as we can identify them and demonstrate their ability to stand in for differential demands. However, by conducting the narrative interviews it was possible to move towards a thick analysis, by specifically asking individuals who had used the terms ‘victim(s)’ what this meant to them, how they identified with it and how important they were to the EDL’s message and identity. We were able to discuss EDL articles and speeches that had used the phrase or had demonstrated a general tone of victimhood. By moving towards this thick analysis it is possible to hear first hand from those within the EDL discourse and to present an analysis of how these empty signifiers construct a collective identity and an antagonistic frontier.

In writing up the analysis of the three research aims that are outlined above it was felt necessary to keep them analytically separate in order that each area is clearly elucidated, even though they interlink considerably. Therefore the analysis of the EDL is divided into three separate chapters with each chapter reliant upon, to varying degrees, all three data streams (narrative interviews, observation and second hand artefacts) in order to provide a thick analysis.

The first analysis chapter (Chapter Four) focuses upon the initial demands of members of the English Defence League and also examines the dislocation event that occurred in Luton in 2009; this means that the analysis has a chronological ‘start point’ – why did the EDL emerge? This chapter is obviously heavily influenced by the data gained from the narrative interviews but also makes use of second hand data such as EDL speeches and documents published in 2009.

The second analysis chapter (Chapter Five) moves from the micro to the meso level and provides an analysis of the EDL’s collective identity as a populist

movement by highlighting the equivalence and antagonism that allows the EDL to construct its identity vis a vis antagonistic ‘others’. The narrative interviews provide data as to how the narrators feel about the ‘others’ and allows for an analysis of the way in which the EDL, through the logic of equivalence, was able to draw together different individuals and sub-groups in a collective EDL identity. By utilising data from observations of EDL demonstrations and meetings it is possible to highlight what form this collective identity takes and also to examine the importance of demonstrations for strengthening the movement’s collective identity. This specific analysis also allows the study to bring the antagonistic other into view and to see how this other is blamed for unfulfilled demands and how the EDL articulates its identity in opposition to this other.

The third empirical chapter will seek to analyse the empty signifier that represents the unfulfilled demands and the EDL identity, namely ‘Victims(s)’ (Chapter Six). ‘Victim(s)’ will be analysed and it will be argued that this empty signifier is able to stand in for, to universally represent, differential demands – indeed it is argued that victim is the empty signifier par excellence because if ‘our’ demands are not being met then ‘we’ are all victims and, what is more, to be a victim points directly to a perpetrator who is responsible for this victimhood.

In presenting these three analytical chapters and in utilising the framework of discourse theory and populism it is possible to present a narrative of the EDL from its inception and to examine the process by which the movement constructed a collective identity that brought thousands of demonstrators onto the streets of English towns and cities. In doing so this work can theorise the political identity of the English Defence League based upon the empirical data that has been gathered and can therefore examine the emergence of the EDL discourse and identity. The next chapter will focus on this work’s methodology.

Chapter Three - Researching the English Defence League

Introduction

In the last chapter it was shown how Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory and Laclau's formal definition of populism provided a theoretical framework which allowed for three specific research aims to be devised. These three research aims, in turn, came from a critical assessment of the literature on the EDL. Furthermore, the previous chapter highlighted the four key analytic concepts that would be utilised to provide an analysis, these being: social demands, logic of equivalence, antagonism and empty signifier. It was also stressed that this study would utilise these four analytical concepts in order to provide both a micro (individual) and meso (group) analysis of the English Defence League.

This thesis thus has three research aims that focused the data gathering and analysis for this project. These three aims can be summarised as:

- 1) Investigate the preconditions that led to the emergence of the EDL as a populist movement
- 2) Examine how the EDL discourse utilised equivalence and antagonism to construct the 'other'
- 3) Identify the empty signifier that produced equivalence within the EDL identity and identify what impact this empty signifier has on the EDL collective identity

It has been argued by Goodwin that too many studies of the far right are 'externalist', meaning that research is directed at factors external to the party such as socio-economic issues (2006, p.348). This has meant that researchers have seldom needed or wanted to study far right movements and parties up close and so have drawn instead upon qualitative macro level research. As this study seeks to examine collective identity and individual motivations for joining and engaging with the EDL and because of the discourse theory approach that this study utilises it was necessary to engage in an in-depth ethnographic methodological approach.

This ethnographic methodology, which was underpinned by a discourse theory social constructivist approach, comprised two primary research methods – participant observation and narrative interviewing. During my participant observation strand of research I attended ten EDL national demonstrations, and nine other events and meetings during a period of eighteen months between March 2013 and September 2014. I was embedded within a group of EDL supporters who were part of a local ‘division’; such local divisions make up the grass-roots organisation of the EDL. Made up of many closely connected individuals who have their own hierarchy and loose organisational structure the local divisions host demonstrations and travel around the country attending demonstrations in other areas.

Within the local group that I gained access to I was able to conduct in depth narrative interviews with nine EDL members and I conducted a total of twenty six narrative interviews. Whilst the participant observation allowed me to gather data that related to the group’s collective identity, the narrative interviews added context to the participant observation and also allowed me to examine the individual motivations for joining and participating in the EDL.

Following from the ontological underpinnings of this work it is held that no matter how sedimented the discourse, no identity can ever be fully fixed or static and therefore identity is contingent and so were my interactions with those I sought to research. Thus, each new interaction led to new possibilities and new constructions. This assumption leads to a research position that is summarised best by Walsh:

if human knowledge is co-constructed, then any research project must involve some degree of mutual exploration and discovery. The unmet challenge for qualitative researchers is to document this process in an open and honest way (1996, p.383).

This chapter will begin with an examination of epistemology and methodology and research design. The issue of gaining access will then be highlighted before moving to examine in detail the participant observation and narrative interviewing and discussing the ethics of this research. The chapter will conclude by demonstrating how the research data was analysed within a discourse theory framework.

3.1 Epistemology and Methodology

If the previous chapter set out this work's ontological assumptions, tied as they are, into the conceptual assumptions of discourse theory then this chapter must necessarily begin by setting out the epistemological approach that will be pursued within this research. As Hay has argued, the relationship between ontology and epistemology is "directional in the sense that ontology logically precedes epistemology" (2002, p.62) and therefore the ontological assumptions that have been laid out in the previous chapter influence the epistemological approach that this work has taken.

Epistemology is here understood as being:

concerned with providing a philosophical grounding for deciding what kinds of knowledge are possible and how we can ensure that they are both adequate and legitimate (Maynard, in Maynard and Purvis 1994, p.10).

In keeping with the constructionist ontological framework of discourse theory this work takes a social constructivist epistemological approach; social constructivism being defined as "one of several interpretivist paradigms... concerned with the ways in which people construct their worlds" (Williamson, 2006, p.85). This approach is delivered via an ethnographic methodology that is itself comprised of specific methods of data gathering – participant observation and narrative interviews being the primary methods.

In keeping with the ontology of discourse theory we find two central pillars that directly relate to the epistemological outlook of this study; these are the contingency of the social world and the fact that all objects and practices are discursively constructed. Based upon an ontology that insists upon contingency and discursive construction an objectivist positivist epistemology would clearly be an illogical approach to take. Since Auguste Comte developed his 'positive science' of human action based upon the methods of the natural sciences and with the ambition of studying general laws and facts of human behaviour positivism has held a tight grip over the social sciences. Despite challenges from interpretivist approaches and more recent post-modern relativism there has remained a:

continuing hold of the positivist imagination [that] can be felt in an emphasis on general, and usually empirical, laws: in doctrines of falsification and prediction... or for mathematical and statistical models: and in adherence to a caricatured view of the natural sciences as a role model (Steinmetz, 2005, loc.728).

This study makes a clear departure from this positivist approach and therefore the research that has been conducted makes no attempt to provide causal explanation or scientific predications, neither does it attempt to formulate laws or quantitative generalisations. Rather, in keeping with discourse theory's insistence of contingency and discursive construction, there is an acceptance that the material world does exist 'out there' but that this material world is only understood through discursive constructions that can never be fixed and thus always have the potential to be altered. In terms of a theory of knowledge this follows the constructionist approach that Michael J. Crotty defines as:

the view that all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context (1998, Loc.865).

This approach to knowledge fits with Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory where material reality is not denied but instead it is understood that external material reality is shaped by and understood through discursive construction (see Jorgensen and Phillips, 2002, p.35). This ontological understanding leads to an epistemological outlook that rejects the notion of 'facts' and 'truth', indeed any strict form of objectivism, because meaning resides with and through the social construction of objects and reality. Therefore the best that any researcher can hope to achieve is to provide an interpretive understanding of a specific phenomenon based upon a double hermeneutic that consists of the researcher's own interpretation of what he or she experiences when engaging with those being researched and which in turn is based upon the interpretations and constructions of those being researched. By utilising the data within a theoretical analytical framework, as was outlined in the previous chapter, the data can be used to construct an understanding of the phenomenon under study. However, no claims to ultimate truth or complete factual explanation can be made, because the epistemology underpinning this work rejects any such possibility due to the constructionist position that asserts that meaning is

constructed as opposed to existing ‘out there’ waiting to be discovered as positivist objectivist conceptions would suppose.

A potential problem with this epistemological approach is that it “drives home unambiguously... that there are no true or valid interpretation[s]” (Crotty, 1998, Loc.957) of any specific social phenomenon. This runs the risk of collapsing all research into complete relativism and thus challenges the very purpose of conducting vigorous social research; if all research is equal in its inability to present any actual truth or validity then on what standards can such research be judged? The answer is surely that we can judge research based upon its usefulness and upon the extent to which it aids our understanding of a specific event or phenomena; whilst all research may be equal in sharing an inability to claim truth or validity this is not to say that all research is equally useful or valuable. As was highlighted in the last chapter, the value of discourse theory research, and an interpretivist approach more generally, is in its ability to provide credible research in the eyes of fellow social scientists.

This thesis’s research is based upon a small scale ethnographic study and has sought to investigate some aspects of the English Defence League. Ethnography has been defined as both methodology and method; however, as already noted above, in this work ethnography is seen as the broad methodological approach which is made up of specific methods. Methodology is here understood as “the means by which we reflect upon the methods appropriate to realise fully our potential to acquire knowledge of that which exists” (Hay, 2002, p.63). If epistemology provides us with a framework for articulating what we can and cannot expect to know by conducting research, then methodology refers to the broad approach the research will take. Brewer’s definition of ethnography fits best with this study’s use of the term; that is to say that ethnography is defined in its broadest sense as opposed to simply being understood as a specific method. Brewer understands ethnography as:

not one particular method of data collection but a style of research that is distinguished by its objectives, which are to understand the social **meanings** and activities of people in a given field or setting, and its approach, which involves close association with, and often participation in, this setting (2000, p.11, emphasis in the original).

The stress upon understanding meanings is inherent to both the interpretivist research approach and discourse theory and so it is the second part of Brewer’s

definition that we should here focus upon – the ethnographic approach. Put simply, my ethnographic approach necessitated that I gain exposure to the EDL and its members which involved following and observing members on demonstrations, forging relationships that allowed me maximum access to their lives both at demo days and away from demo days and conducting in depth discussions with individual members in order to provide depth to and greater understanding of what I had witnessed during my field research.

This ‘embedded’ and ‘high exposure’ approach to research is why the ethnographic methodology “is more appropriate to the nature of human social life” (Brewer, 2000 p.57). It allows the researcher to understand how social actors and social groups construct the world around them; the ethnographic researcher can never provide the definitive approach – indeed another researcher presented with the same raw data would no doubt offer an alternative interpretation. However, the ethnographic approach does allow for a thick description of the phenomenon under study. This ethnographic approach is especially useful when studying a social movement such as the EDL because it allows for both a micro (individual) and meso (group) perspective; as Plows has noted, “Social movements...are highly fluid, rapidly shifting phenomenon; and ethnography can capture significant shifts missed by macro-level analysis” (2009, p.7).

3.2 Research Design – Theory Driven Thick Description

In his well known discussion of ethnography as ‘thick description’ Clifford Geertz explains that:

What the ethnographer is in fact faced with...is a multiplicity of complex conceptual structures, many of them superimposed upon or knotted into one another, which are at once strange, irregular, and inexplicit, and which he must contrive somehow first to grasp and then to render (1973, p.10).

In order to embrace this complexity rather than being overcome by it, it is necessary to have a coherent yet fluid research design that allows for an iterative approach to data gathering and analysis. The iterative approach accepts that analysis is ongoing and often overlapping with data collection (O’Rielly, 2012,), hence there are not always clearly defined ‘stages’ as one might hope for. Data gathering can lead to data analysis that then requires further data

gathering in order to complete new data analysis; consequently there is a shifting between the stages because of the inherent complexity of the phenomenon under study. In this particular research there was also movement between the different research methods of participant observation and narrative interviewing which allowed for a complimentary data gathering aspect – observing the EDL in ‘the field’ and then conducting one on one narrative interviews in order to better contextualise and add depth to the observations.

This iterative aspect of ethnography is commonly combined with an inductive approach that requires theory to be built up along with the data analysis; however, in the case of this research a theoretical position and framework – discourse theory – was already in place before the research commenced. Indeed discourse theory had allowed for a deconstruction of the contemporary literature on the EDL and, as noted in the previous chapter, had also driven the research aims that formed the framework for the research. Therefore the ethnographic approach in this study is not inductive in the simplistic sense. In any event, recent years have seen this simplistic idea of inductive ethnography challenged; the idea that the researcher can begin to immerse themselves in the data without any preconceived theories has lost credibility, as Ezzy notes:

all data are theory driven. The point is not to pretend they are not, or to force the data into theory. Rather, the researcher should enter into an ongoing simultaneous process of deduction and induction, of theory building, testing and rebuilding (Ezzy, 2002, p.10).

Ezzy thus argues that all data is in at least some aspect theory driven and even our initial interpretations and what we choose to focus upon during our ethnographic research is in some form or another driven by our theoretical conceptions, even if we try to claim that the approach to the data is ‘theory free’. The choice therefore is between using theory to guide research or using research to build theory; both approaches can claim to be inductive so long as there is temporal interaction and some analytical connection between theory and data, in essence “sophisticated inductivism views theory as precursor, medium and outcome of ethnographic study and writing (O’Reilly, 2012, Loc.781).

A useful distinction between these two approaches is provided by Lichterman’s (in Klandermans and Staggenborg, 2002, pp.118-145) discussion of research in which he distinguishes between ‘field-driven’ and ‘theory driven’ approaches. In essence, ‘field driven’ approaches seek to provide illumination of a specific

empirical phenomenon (a group or section of the community); the researcher is focused on producing data on that specific phenomenon and therefore theory can be utilised in order to highlight or further the understanding of this empirical phenomenon. This approach can be contrasted with the ‘theory driven’ approach which Lichterman articulates as aiming:

to address a theory, rather than to elucidate a substantive topic or field site with perhaps several theories...in this theory driven mode, we keep in mind that a field site could always get theorized in many different ways (in Klandermans and Staggenborg, 2002, p.122).

In essence then, a ‘theory driven’ approach operates on two different levels; firstly, to use a theory to drive research into a particular empirical phenomenon by utilising it to problematise previous research, provide analytical categories and devise research agendas and, secondly, to demonstrate the usefulness of a specific theory to provide insight into empirical phenomenon. This approach, as Lichterman notes (in Klandermans and Staggenborg, 2002, p.123), also allows for generalisation and can speak to wider issues and concerns instead of being solely focused on the specific group, this contrasts with a field-driven project. For example, Patrick’s excellent study of a Glasgow gang provides detailed insight on the particulars of the gang that he observed and could be of interest to those studying young male gangs in general, however, it offers little in the way of wider understandings of group or individual identity and social action because it lacks a specific theory driven component.

This thesis’s theory-driven approach does not, however, mean that the commitment to empirical thick description is in any way secondary; as Lichterman stresses “the empirical field of observation is central” in ‘theory-driven’ research (in Klandermans and Staggenborg, 2002, p.123) just as it is in field driven research. The difference lies in the fact that in ‘theory-driven’ research the empirical phenomenon is already explicitly being viewed through a given theoretical lens from the beginning of the research design process rather than theory being generated through empirical analysis as in a grounded theory style approach. By pursuing a theory driven approach this project utilises discourse theory to elucidate the English Defence League, acknowledging that this is just one possible way of theorising the EDL. In addition the data, when viewed through the theoretical lens of discourse theory, can also speak to the wider populist and social movement literature.

Having a theory driven research project allowed for a deconstruction of the literature in the initial instant by using a broad discourse theory approach to question some of the other research into and interpretations of the EDL and also to build up to a set of research aims based upon the concepts provided by Laclau. The problematising of the literature and the early design of the study was also based upon a previous small scale ethnographic study of the EDL that I had carried out in 2010 for a Master's Degree at Keele University. Because of this prior experience I already had a series of issues that I wished to explore deeper and also an understanding of the organisation of the EDL and some contacts within the group. My earlier ethnography had looked at some post-structural and post-modern theories of identity and action; however, it had lacked a guiding theoretical position, instead being more field-driven.

After completing this first ethnographic study I became aware that the theory of Laclau and Mouffe offered a potential way of illuminating some of the blind spots within current EDL research and also some of the unanswered questions and underdeveloped understandings of my previous foray into the EDL. This led to the decision to begin with a committed theory driven research agenda that built upon and moved beyond my initial EDL research.

I also required a contextually deeper and temporally longer exposure to the EDL and this led to the decision to pursue two discreet yet inter-related research methods in order to provide a thick description, namely participant observation and narrative interviewing. These methods originally had a consecutive relationship, with participant observation allowing me to make and strengthen my relationship with members of the EDL by attending demonstrations and then, once sufficient trust and rapport was built, moving to one on one interviews. However, after time they could become concurrent allowing me to attend demonstrations and gatherings of the EDL and then discuss these events in detail with individual members so as to add context to the events themselves; it also allowed for data to be collected on different levels – both the micro and meso. This double method provided what Geertz calls the “grasp” and “render” which is needed for thick description. I was able to add context to what I had observed in the field by conducting one on one interviews whilst maintaining my position as a participant observer during EDL demonstrations, gatherings and meetings.

Owing to the iterative nature of ethnography there is constant movement and negotiation within and between the different research phases as there is with the

data that is gathered. By having a set of theory driven research questions I was able to maintain focus even when confronted with a mass of data which was often confusing and ‘messy’. However, I knew that I would also come across information that I could not have predicted and because of this I was also able to move back to the initial research questions and to the theoretical concepts when the data necessitated this.

3.3 Locating the Field

Ethnographic research requires that the researcher conducts ‘fieldwork’ in order to collect data that can then be analysed; therefore it is a useful initial task if the researcher identifies and locates exactly where that fieldwork will take place. Classical ethnography, rooted in anthropology, had a fixed field in which to conduct research because it was “aimed at giving holistic representations of more or less clearly bounded, fairly small groups” (Nadai and Maeder, 2005, p.1) for example, the ‘native’ village. However, when examining social movements that by their nature are transient and ephemeral this ‘field’ becomes less fixed and more porous. The English Defence League has no central headquarters teeming with staff and offices that an ethnographer can access, it has no regular national meeting place that can be staked out by a researcher and it is organised on a local basis by local regionalised divisions who all have different hierarchical structures. Even within these local divisions organisation is commonly done via social media and meetings, when they are held, occur in ad hoc locations; meaning that there is a certain “fuzziness” (Nadai and Maeder, 2005, p.5) to the exact field in which this ethnography was carried out. As a researcher I had to be as mobile as those who I was studying.

What was vital for this ethnography was an ability to speak in detail to those who were being studied and to observe and participate in the actions that I wanted to understand. The philosopher Karl Mannheim argued that through language we learn that “thought is not confined to books alone, but gets its chief meaning from the experiences of everyday life” (1991, p.63); this is the essence of an ethnography and at the same time the way in which a particular field site should be chosen. Any field site must grant the ethnographer a glimpse into the events of those being studied. In terms of the English Defence League members participate in mass demonstrations, indeed for anyone to be allowed to class themselves with any seriousness as a ‘member’ there is an expectation that they

will regularly attend demonstrations. Therefore, any ethnography of the EDL and especially one that seeks to understand the movement's collective identity must involve exposure to the demonstrations.

As Johnston et al have noted, the constructionist research and analytical strategy "points to the interaction among social movement participants as the locus of research on identity processes" (in Johnston et al, 1994, p.16); it was therefore necessary for me to engage in these shared EDL events which act as both the purpose and construction of the movement's collective identity. The EDL demonstrations that I attended during my participant observation research occurred in towns and cities throughout England, each of these towns and cities became, for a time, my 'field'. Each town and city provided the demonstrations with a slightly different flavour – local population, geography and law enforcement all gave each demonstration a slightly different nuance. Just as importantly, the EDL will often use local issues and politics as the backdrop for their demonstration and this again imbues the specific locale with a certain contextualised meaning for the duration of the demonstration. For example, a demonstration aimed at halting the building of a Mosque has a very different feel to a demonstration aimed at a recent case of child abuse.

In addition to the demonstrations I also attended local events, outings and meetings that were arranged by the local EDL group with which I was embedded. These events had a more local feel to them, local EDL supporters in their local area. All of these different field sites, however, shared one key characteristic for my research: they enabled me to see and experience the collective actions of the group and provided data that was utilised in addressing my specific interest in collective identity construction through the role of equivalence, antagonism and the empty signifier.

The narrative interviews that I carried out with nine EDL members also took place in a variety of field settings because of the initial reluctance of the majority to come and speak to me one on one at the University campus, an understandable reluctance given that academics are treated with some suspicion within the EDL at large. Therefore these narrative interviews took place at members' homes, in cafes and even in a car, field settings that allowed those talking to me to feel comfortable whilst also affording the necessary minimum levels of privacy and comfort that enable an in depth interview to take place.

It is important to note that all of these ‘fields’ are constituted by the ethnographer, they do not simply exist ‘out there’ waiting to be discovered and rendered knowable. In her ethnographic study Duits acknowledges that the field is constituted in three separate ways; firstly by the “ethnographers gaze” (2008, p.67), secondly by the way in which it is reconstituted through the text and thirdly based upon the reader’s contextualisation of the text (2008, p.67). To these three processes we can also add a fourth which is the theoretical framework through which the field is analysed. In essence, each of these fields is constituted by me as a researcher, by my interpretative gaze that brought into being the demonstrations and interviews as a lived experience to be researched. I then had to represent these lived experiences in my writing throughout this study and this writing was based upon an analytical framework which directed my focus towards some data rather than other data. And finally, these fields will be re-understood and re-constituted by the reader who will bring their own understandings to the text.

3.4 Gaining Access

For any ethnographic study to be successful the researcher must be able to gain and maintain direct access to those who are to be studied and, in the case of far right groups such as the English Defence League, the issues of access can present a significant challenge to a researcher. As Blee notes “Far-right groups tend to regard academics as untrustworthy or hostile and generally are determined to prevent entree to their groups or members” (2007, p.121). This, however, was not my experience in general. I had access to grass roots members who were not linked to a specific chain of command and because of the nature of a social movement such as the EDL, with its porous boundaries and lack of centralised command and control, it is easy for a researcher to gain access at a grass roots level. Indeed Busher gained easy access at a more senior level of the EDL, being invited to join demonstrations by a divisional ‘admin’ (Busher, 2016, Loc.961). My access was however, through a pre-established connection who had previously aided me in my MA research.

Unlike more centralised organisations and groups, individual members and sub-groups within the EDL have much more freedom and the leadership lacks any apparatus to directly control who individual members or sub-groups within the movement speak to and invite to demonstrations. However, despite this,

attempting to persuade individuals to participate in such research can still present a challenge. Whilst the leadership and divisional organisers appear willing to speak (Busher, 2016, Loc.961), some grass roots members were more reticent especially because I was operating at the grass roots level as opposed to having access at a higher divisional organiser level. Yet I felt it important to go in on the ground without drawing ‘official’ attention because this was the way in which ‘ordinary’ supporters would experience the movement. By seeking the attention of senior organisers and being an ‘official’ ethnographer there was a risk that my experience could have, in some way, have been censured.

In addition to highlighting the suspicion and hostility that far-right groups and movements display towards academic researchers, Blee also notes a second impediment to access, this being the fact that “academics tend to have few, if any, personal contacts through whom they can gain entrance” to far right groups or movements (2007, p.121). This would certainly go some way to explain why in recent years academic research into social movements has tended to focus on the ‘progressive’ movements of the left rather than movements of the right; not only are progressive left movements more in keeping with most scholars’ normative outlooks but contacts with and therefore access to such progressive groups is much more likely for the University based researcher. For example, in recent years there has been a rise in ‘action research’ that involves researchers who have a political affinity with those who they research and who seek to provide a “practical outcome based on the lives and works of the participants” (Stringer, 1999, p.18) which can positively affect the social movement and its desired outcomes.

Clearly it is exceptionally unlikely that such ‘action research’ would be conducted by academics studying a far right movement such as the EDL. Instead it is more likely that such studies will take a more critical stance against such far right movements and their objectives and these therefore further increases the suspicions that these groups feel towards academics. Hence studies of far right movements, and especially grass-roots movements, can face a circular problem that starts with academics having a normative political objection against the far right movements. This results in a consequent lack of contacts within such movements that then engenders significant distrust towards academics on the part of members of these movements which is further inflamed by prior studies that the far right movement may feel has been critical

of them. This can make gaining an initial contact a very difficult and time consuming prospect.

Agar has argued that for a successful ethnographic study to begin, there is a need for a researcher to find a “social trail from yourself to your first informant” (1996, p.79) and this is indeed crucial as this initial contact can often provide a gateway into the group that is to be studied. In his seminal ethnography of a gang in Glasgow, Patrick (1973, p.28) highlighted the importance of a ‘facilitator’ who can provide the researcher with access to the group and its members and who can also and just as importantly ‘validate’ the researcher in the eyes of other members of the group. The choice of initial informant or facilitator is thus crucial to an ethnographic project. Fetterman suggests that, ideally, this initial contact or facilitator should be someone with close ties to the group under study and who enjoys the confidence and trust of individuals within the group (1998, pp.33-34). Thus the right initial contact does not just provide access but also provides the ethnographer with a degree of trust by association.

As a researcher I had a strong ‘social trail’ having known Adam, my facilitator, from a previous research study; indeed it had been a chance encounter with Adam in 2010 that had led to my first research into the English Defence League for my Master’s Degree. It was thus fortunate for this project that I had a strong contact with whom I had previously researched. Owing to this degree of familiarity, Adam treated me less like an academic researcher and more like a subordinate peer; his willingness to let me accompany him on demonstrations, to the pub and to EDL meetings was crucial in ensuring consistent data collection. As a facilitator Adam was also willing to ‘vouch’ for me to other EDL members within his circle and this allowed for a ‘snowball’ effect whereby my pool of active participants who were willing to share their stories with me grew. And, whilst Adam’s introductions did not convince everybody to participate directly in the study, it did mean that there was never, to my knowledge, any outright complaint about my presence during demonstrations and outings with the particular sub-group of the EDL with whom I was embedded.

As a former soldier in his late twenties with a reputation as a ‘tough scrapper’ and having been involved in the EDL since late 2009, Adam was someone who enjoyed the ‘respect’ of other EDL members in his local sub group and who also had contacts with members from other groups and some members of the EDL leadership. Whilst Adam was, for reasons that he never made explicit to

me, unwilling to grant me introductions to members outside of his sub-group or to the EDL leadership, within his sub group I benefited from his dominant position as one of the ‘top blokes’. As Fetterman notes, “ethnographers...benefit from a halo effect if they are introduced by the right person” (1998, p.34) and I certainly gained access and a level of trust that I doubt I could ever have achieved without Adam’s patronage. Within his sub group of EDL devotees it was clear that he felt comfortable personally vouching for me as an “alright bloke who won’t lie about us”, yet his hesitance to introduce me and vouch for me to individuals outside of his rather small sub-group and especially to the leadership also suggested to me that his willingness to trust me only existed up to a certain point. In addition, whilst I was embedded within his sub-group he was able to exercise a degree of control over me, explaining things and inviting other members to share stories, however, had he made introductions for me with other such sub-groups he would have risked losing that control.

Indeed, whilst Adam proved to be an extremely useful and willing ‘facilitator’, it was initially difficult for me to break away from his control. Other members were unwilling to talk to me on their own and without Adam’s ‘say so’, for example, when I asked Chris if he would be willing to take part in a one on one narrative interview his first concern was “is Adam okay with this”? Unfortunately, in the initial stages of the research Adam made it clear that he did not want me talking to members of the sub-group without him being present, despite me explaining that without one on one interviews my research would be incomplete. Hence Adam’s role as a facilitator was also somewhat ambiguous, allowing me access to the group but also restricting my access at the same time. Whilst having a respected facilitator is without doubt of great importance, it can also be somewhat of a mixed blessing when this facilitator’s position within the group allows him to dominate and control the research.

Adam’s dominant position and his ability to control my interactions with other supporters meant that in the initial phases of the ethnography I had to carefully negotiate my way through the group. Whilst I had gained acceptance due to Adam’s patronage and was able to attend demonstrations and meetings, and thus pursue my participant observation research, it was clear that Adam was not going to allow me to speak to other supporters alone. Rather than risk unsettling my relationship with Adam and thus risk losing what access I had gained, I decided to abide by this rule in the first instance.

This impasse was eventually resolved when I formed a relationship with another member of the EDL, David, who would often come on demonstrations with Adam's sub-group but who, by virtue of the fact that he lived some distance was not 'one of the lads'. David was older, at around forty, and was, almost instantly, keen to talk and discuss his involvement with the EDL and politics in general and made it quite clear that he did not need or care for Adam's permission to talk to me one on one. Whilst speaking to David risked causing a conflict with Adam I nevertheless decided to go ahead and talk to David. I decided that as David was an older and experienced activist and not a full member of Adam's sub-group that I could justify it; when I told Adam he shrugged it off without making comment. However, once I had spoken to David one on one and once other members of the group knew that I had spoken to David one on one it appeared that Adam's permission seemed less important and without any real explicit acknowledgment I was able to begin conducting my narrative interviews. Adam thus relaxed and did not say anything on the subject preferring to pretend that he had never made the rule in the first place. I never referred to this incident to Adam, as I felt it had been a potentially 'close call' and was glad that it had not destabilised our relationship and thus the project.

Gaining and maintaining access during the ethnography was a process of ongoing negotiation. Gaining access in the first instance is vital but there is then a need to maintain this access, indeed to push this access even further in order to gather the necessary data. Gaining access to the group is just the beginning for an ethnographic study that also uses interviewing, because the researcher then needs to gain access to each individual in order to pursue these interviews.

3.5 Participant Observation

The first method that this study utilised chronologically was participant observation. Whilst there are many specific variations of participant observation depending upon the specifics of the research project, a general definition is a useful starting point and is provided by DeWalt and DeWalt:

Participant observation is a method in which a researcher takes part in the daily activities, rituals, interactions, and events of a group of people as one of the means of learning the explicit and tacit aspects of their life routines and their culture (2011, p.1).

As a research method participant observation is rooted in the anthropological tradition and is particularly connected to the works of Malinowski (2014). The method was one in which researchers would live within communities for a prolonged period of time; however, as the method has become more widely used by other disciplines such as political science this total immersion within a group has changed somewhat. For Malinowski, living as he was with the Trobriand Islanders, there was the ability to:

take part, in a way, in the village life, to look forward to the important or festive events...to wake up every morning to a new day, presenting itself to me more or less as it does to the natives (2014, p.7).

Clearly for a study of a social movement whose members often only meet on pre-arranged demonstrations and gatherings and who spend most of their time at home with families, at work or otherwise disengaged from the official activities of the group a 'total immersion' is not possible. Unlike Malinowski I did not wake up every morning with the members of the EDL, though neither do members of the EDL wake up alongside fellow members, instead there was a 'coming together' at demo days and other official or unofficial meetings. My participant observation therefore meant that I took part in the 'activities, rituals, interactions, and events' of the EDL, however, not on a daily basis as such occasions did not occur on such a basis. This is a similar position to that of Patrick (1973) who studied a Glasgow gang who met at weekends. Patrick would, like the members of the gang who he was observing, continue with his life in a relatively normal way during the week and then become immersed during the weekend.

This is an appropriate point at which to discuss the differing levels of engagement that can exist within participant observation research. Dependent upon such particulars as the researcher, the project, or those being studied participant observation differs to the extent of the researcher's engagement as a participant. In 1958 Raymond L. Gold defined four different positions that a researcher could hold during field observation, these being: complete participant, participant as observer, observer as participant and complete observer. The latter two positions would fall within what we may term 'non-participant' observation and so it is the first two – complete participant and participant as observer - that are of interest to our discussion.

Gold understands the role of complete participant as being a covert role. He explains that “the true identity and purpose of the complete participant in field research are not known to those whom he researches” (1958, p.219), therefore the researcher has to ‘act out’ a certain persona and constantly swap roles as a participant and as an ‘outside’ observer. A key concern with the concept of complete participant is its ‘covert’ nature which was not acceptable within the ethical criteria of this project.

Gold’s second role is termed participant-as-observer which “differs significantly in that both field worker and informant are aware that theirs is a field relationship” (1958. p.220); this role is the one that best describes my role during this research and is clearly more acceptable on an ethical basis. However, Gold acknowledges that the ‘field relationship’ is far from unproblematic and fixed and he correctly notes that the field relationship can, over time, become less formalised and less objectively clear. There is also the difficulty of negotiating the different ‘roles’ as both observer and participant, however, this tension between roles as both participant and observer is, as O’Reilly argues, a great source of creativity within a research project (2012, Loc.2456). This means that whilst you may attempt to act as the objective professional observer, as a participant and actor within the group you start to become a part of the intimate and subjective side of those who you study. Whilst the ‘scientific’ research of early ethnographers stressed the importance of observation – as one would observe any other natural phenomenon – ethnography that is based upon interpretivist perspectives stresses the nature of shared constructions through interactions and thus the ‘participation’ aspect of ethnography becomes more important. As Holy notes, a logical position of an interpretivist understanding:

implies a research procedure in which the notion of participation in the subject’s activities replaces the notion of their simple observation as the main data yielding technique. It is a research procedure in which the researcher does not participate in the lives of the subjects in order to observe them, but rather observes while participating fully in their lives (1984, p.174).

This is an important point and I found that my field notes of demonstrations often contained as much information on what I was experiencing as a participant as what I was observing other participants doing. Indeed, in many respects what I was experiencing was influenced by what I was observing. I

thus became both participant in-the-moment and observer after-the-fact, the two roles and two stages both intertwined but also somehow separate. As a participant I lived and experienced the moments of the demonstrations, the togetherness, the carnival atmosphere and also, at times, the fear. Only later, after the event, could I sit down and attempt to draw from my experiences and observations tangible data that was relevant to my research criteria. Undoubtedly, the experience of being a part of the EDL demonstration, albeit whilst acting as a researcher, provided more depth of experience than if I had simply stood aloof on some vantage point and observed only. Also, my role as participant, as already mentioned, made me an intimate part of the sub-group who I was attached to studying.

I found that this intimacy was especially formed during the demonstrations that were more hostile and adrenaline fuelled, where EDL supporters, counter demonstrators and the police all exist in close proximity to each other and with a high degree of mutual antagonism. Inevitably in such an environment in which I was ‘a part of’ as both participant and observer there became a sense of shared experience, of shared risk; I began to understand why ‘demo days’ were such an integral part of the EDL narrative and collective identity. Once when a Unite Against Fascism supporter spat at me – after all I was a participant of the EDL demonstration – and a ‘fellow’ EDL member placed his hand on my shoulder and asked me if I was okay there was a moment of shared and mutual connection; regardless of my political opinions this sense of sharing risk and danger does inevitably bring one close to those who you are sharing the experience with. Yet, while being a participant can draw you closer, even with those with who you politically disagree, being an observer reminds you of that political disagreement and also reminds you that you are not - however hard you may pretend – one of them, I was never an insider even though at times I felt as if I was. This conflict was for me ever present and I found that it was best summed up by Geertz who remarks that ethnographic participant observation “is a question of living a multiplex life: sailing at once in several seas” (1988, p.77).

In total I attended ten EDL demonstrations during a period of eighteen months between March 2013 and September 2014 and five outings with some of the narrators. My identity was known only to the small group of members, who effectively made up a sub-group of the larger division. Outside of this small group of members and within the local division and other divisions my identity

was unknown. The EDL is organised at a grass-roots level via local ‘divisions’ who will usually travel to the demonstration location together and then ‘meet up’ with other divisions to form a whole. On demonstration days I was, apart from those few who knew me, simply another face in the crowd and I did my best to blend in and not to look conspicuous. I was able to experience, as closely as possible, what any other grass roots EDL members experienced and I attracted no extra attention.

I would always carry a small notebook in which to ‘jot’ down the sights, sounds and feelings of demos and other outings. At times when writing in my notebook would risk drawing attention to me I would make briefer notes on my mobile phone, key phrases that would re-jog my memory later when I was writing up my full account of each event. This full ‘after the fact’ write up was time consuming and I would search my memory and my rough notes for anything and everything. The process was aided somewhat by being focused upon and within my analytical strategy guided by my research questions which were in turn based upon my theoretical concerns and therefore I always had a rudimentary direction of travel when writing up notes. However, I also did not want to leave information out that I found interesting just because it was not directly related to my research questions. The process was a reflexive one, and I constantly asked myself ‘can I write that?’, ‘did I definitely hear that?’ and ‘does this really help answer my research question?’, ultimately extra words always ended up being added and I always wrote down more rather than less. Writing up these notes became the first stage of my analysis. Inevitably what I saw, heard and felt on each of my outings was peculiar to me, how I interpreted what I saw, heard and felt and the act of writing this down in my notes afterwards means that my account is, inevitably, subjective and personalised.

Because of the subjective nature of participant observation Adler and Adler note that “criticisms levelled against observational research lies in the area of validity” (in Denzin and Lincoln, 1994, p.381). Indeed, carried out alone and in isolation there may be a validity issue with observation; my observations and interpretations of the EDL provide only one dimension and could not provide the depth of understanding that is required of a qualitative ethnography. It was therefore necessary for me to augment observation with detailed unstructured interviews that ran parallel to much of the observation, starting two months after my first outing with the EDL and ending three weeks after my last outing. It is to this second method that we will now turn.

3.6 The Narrative Interview

Whilst participant observation is the mainstay of any ethnographic study, informal in-depth interviews can be utilised as an additional qualitative method. This can be done for the purpose of triangulation so as to increase validity as discussed above but is also useful for this specific study that seeks to analyse both the micro and meso levels. DeWalt and DeWalt note that the goal of such interviews is to “look for new insights into the point of view of the participants” (2011, p.137). By engaging in in-depth interviews it was possible to discuss the initial motivational factors, or in Laclau’s terms ‘demands’, that led to individuals becoming involved in the EDL; the interviews also added depth and context to my participant observational data.

By gaining access to the local group of EDL members I was able, over time, to persuade individuals to take part in these one-on-one interviews. Unlike the conversational discussions that I had during participant observations the interviews allowed a much more focused discussion and were easier to record and collate. In total I conducted twenty six interviews with nine individuals, these interviews varied in length from between thirty five minutes and ninety minutes, providing a rich source of primary data. These interviews are utilised throughout this study in the same manner as my participant observation field notes. As has already been noted above, these interviews should be seen as occurring in a ‘field’ setting just as my participant observation was.

The locations of the interviews varied, fifteen were conducted within the homes of EDL members, six took place in public areas such as cafes, two took place in my car, one took place on a train and two conducted at a car repair garage where one individual worked. All of these locations afforded a level of privacy where we could discuss issues and, most importantly, the individuals felt comfortable in these locations. These interviews were designed to be informal and to work in tandem with participant observation. All of the individuals I interviewed had first encountered me during my participant observation and thus these interviews were kept informal, however, they were not simply conversations because both myself and the individual knew that this was part of a structured data collection process.

In keeping with the epistemological and methodological framework of this research these interviews sought to move beyond the traditional social science

interview where the ‘respondent’ or ‘participant’ being interviewed is viewed simply as a vessel of real, objective answers. Or, in other words:

[in the] conventional view, the subjects behind respondents are basically conceived as passive *vessels of answers* for experiential questions put to them by interviewers. Subjects are repositories of facts, feelings, and the related particulars of experience (Gubrium and Holstein in Gubrium and Holstein, 2001, p.30).

It is clear, especially when seeking to examine the discursive constructs of respondents, as this work seeks to do, that by understanding respondents as passive answer vessels is to misconstrue the interview process. In this study, the purpose of the interview was not to gain access to a true and objective reality that exists independent of the researcher and that can be accessed by asking penetrating questions and thus gaining admittance to the ontological reality of the participant. Rather it was to understand how members of the EDL constructed their actions and the actions of others and how these constructions fitted into the EDL’s discourse. In my interviews I was more concerned with providing a high level of understanding as opposed to providing pure factual accounts that could produce explanation. The example below, which is taken from the research conducted for this thesis, is indicative of how the interviews provided an understanding of discursive construction rather than a factual explanation.

At one EDL demonstration that I attended, I witnessed a member of the Unite Against Fascism counter demonstration being moved away from an EDL protest area by police officers. Four police officers moved the man away from the EDL, the police officers appeared calm and friendly towards the man and one police officer placed his hand on the man’s arm and guided him away from the EDL area. However, his removal precipitated howls of derision from the group of around 70 EDL demonstrators who witnessed it. They shouted at the man being removed and several EDL supporters made comments regarding the fact that the police “are on our side today”. This was all relatively routine and something that occurs frequently at these highly charged demonstrations where EDL, UAF and the police exist in close proximity and in an especially combative atmosphere.

Three of my narrators were in the crowd of 70 or so EDL supporters close to where I was standing and so would have directly seen at least part of the

incident; a fourth was at the train station, some distance away, and so would not have directly witnessed the arrest.

The event was first discussed, quite unexpectedly and without me bringing it up during an interview days after the event with Chris who had been at the train station when the arrest occurred and who therefore did not directly witness it.

Me: So, Saturday was a small demonstration?

Chris: Yes, but they are sometimes the best, you know, the best times because people really get to see it as it truly is. So I'm glad you know.

Me: What, you mean the EDL demonstrators get to see what it's really like?

Chris: No not that. I'm not talking about EDL. You don't get it. I mean the other people, the people who live in the area. They get to see how few of us there are out here spreading the message, they see the dedication and they see how we are suppressed to fuck. When there is just, you know, 50, 100 of us and we are outnumbered by the UAF attacking us people realise it is us who are in the right, it's us who have to take shit.

Me: Oh, I get you. So it makes people sympathetic to the cause and sympathetic to you guys?

Chris: Exactly that... right. Even the ordinary cops are sympathetic to us you know. They get that we are being suppressed, they support us, it's just their bosses that hate us. On Saturday they nicked one UAF cunt who is always giving us grief, always. Well the cops gave him a slap is what I heard, in front of us. I didn't see it but it was in front of a load of the lads, the cops got him [the UAF demonstrator] and told him to fuck off and they didn't do it gently. Just goes to show that the decent P.C.s [Police Constables] know that we get put on and abused and they help us (Chris, Interview 2)

Because the second hand account of supposed police vengeance against the UAF protester that Chris provided was radically different to relatively calm incident that I had actually witnessed I decided to bring it up with the three EDL supporters who were in the same crowd as me and who therefore would have seen firsthand some or all of the arrest. I asked all three exactly the same question when I spoke to each of them – the question being “Did you see the

UAF guy get removed by the police? What happened?” Their replies below are in full:

Fiona: Yes, it was funny wasn't it? He is one of the main people who are always having a go at us, he talks about us online as well. He deserved it. They [the police officers] just laughed at him and pushed him over. I think they had decided to help us out that day because they could see we were outnumbered

Adam: He got a bit of flack! Did you see it? [I confirmed that I had seen it]. You could see the cops loved it, I think their bosses must have been away, I mean not been about at that time. The cops hate them as much as we do, the cops suffer from this left wing political correction [political correctness] just as much as us, they are victims of it too... You know like us. It was good to see it happen right in front of us. The just grabbed him and chucked him about, the bloke looked like he was going to cry.

Ian: Some people reckoned he got battered. I didn't see but you could tell the cops wanted to fucking thump him, they [the police] was on our side for once.

It is here clear to see how the accounts of the EDL demonstrators present varied from my own field notes and what is more, how the second hand account from Chris who was at the demonstration but not witness to the event itself, was even more detached from my notes. If I were trying simply to gather objective factual information from the interviews in order to explain events then I would have been forced to have dismissed the interview data as ‘inaccurate’ and lacking validity. However, it actually provides a rich source of understanding, and demonstrates how events are narrated and constructed in order to fit with the EDL discourse of victimhood and righteousness. The arrest of the UAF demonstrator becomes a central reference frame in what was otherwise a small and uneventful demonstration. News of the arrest spreads to those (like David) who were not present and the arrest becomes intimately connected to the discourse of victims, struggle and oppression and is used to support the belief that ordinary police officers are separate from the political establishment that seeks to oppress the EDL.

Thus, the narrative interviews became a key interpretivist method, it provided me with a way of understanding how the narrators understood events, as Soss notes, such interviews allow the researcher to:

pursue the meanings of specific statements by locating them within a broader web of narratives, explanations, telling omissions and non verbal cues...[and make] it possible to explore how individual comments fit together as parts of a more meaningful whole” (Soss in Yanow and Schwartz-Shea, 2015, p.162).

The fact that what was narrated to me by the individual EDL supporters was not what I had seen relates directly to Marshall and Rossman’s concern regarding truthfulness in interviews (1995, p.81) and would of course be an issue if the purpose of these interviews was to gain access to ‘objective’ truth. However, because this project is grounded upon a social constructivist epistemology and a discourse theory analytical framework the fact that the statements may not be truthful does not negate or invalidate the data, rather, it demonstrates how these individuals are seeking to project their identity through narrative. Indeed as Jorgensen and Phillips point out:

In discourse analytical research, the primary exercise is not to sort out which of the statements about the world in the research material are right and which are wrong...On the contrary, the analyst has to work with what has been said or written... and identifying the social consequences of different discursive representations of reality (2002, p.21).

Whilst it is my role to point out discrepancies within the narrations and field notes if I am aware of them, so that the reader can better judge the data, the truth or falsity of a narration is not what is at issue. The fact that someone is narrating the world in a particular way is much more relevant to the study of discourse and identity than the truthfulness or otherwise of the utterance. The fact that numerous individuals are collectively constructing specific events in similar ways highlights how a specific discourse operates. Such an approach follows Bevir and Rhodes, in their interpretive study of British politics, who highlight the crucial importance of the narrative to understandings within political science (2003, p.19). As Bevir and Rhodes note, such an approach is interested in asking the question “what is the meaning of it?” as opposed to “Is it true?” (2003, p.1).

Through the interviews, we can focus on how these individual members narrate life events and because of this it seems more appropriate to term the individuals whom I interviewed ‘narrators’ rather than ‘respondents’ or ‘participants’. The interview was not simply a place in which they responded to questions and their

place within the interview was more than simply that of participants, instead, in the interviews these individuals acted as narrators, each with a story to tell. And each story could be examined with reference to the wider EDL discourse; indeed, each story actively added to, altered or amended that discourse whilst also being structured by it.

What the above example shows is how the interviews allow us to observe the process by which the narrators' stories form a part of the EDL's collective memory as Atkinson and Coffey note:

Memory is a cultural phenomenon, and is therefore a collective one. What is "memorable" is a function of the cultural categories that shape what is thinkable and what is not, what is counted as appropriate, what is valued, what is noteworthy (in Gubrium and Holstein, 2001, p.118).

This acknowledgement also necessitates that we understand the interview process as much more than simply question and answer. By acknowledging the fact that the interview is an arena for narration, we also realise that the interview is an active process – part of an ongoing narration and construction of life events operating within a specific discourse. Therefore, we move beyond the classical binary that separates on the one hand participant observation and on the other hand interviewing. The interview now becomes much more than simply a chance for the researcher to fact check or triangulate data, it is an active and action oriented aspect of the research just as much as the participant observation is.

As Fontana and Prokos note "many qualitative researchers differentiate between in depth (ethnographic) interviewing and participant observation" (2007, p.39; also Burnham et al, 2008); and whilst we may wish to discuss them as two different methods for the sake of methodological clarity they actually have a great deal in common. This is simply to accept that the interview is, in Scheurich's words, "slippery, unstable and ambiguous from person to person, from situation to situation, from time to time" (1997, p.62). An active interview understood as a narration of events is no less complex, no more stable and no less ambiguous than the research that I conducted on the streets during EDL demonstrations.

The narrative interview is an interview that moves beyond the standard question and answer interview because of the recognition of the importance of allowing narrators time to speak freely, without constraints. In reality, all interviews will

necessarily contain at least some questions, even if it is simply “can you tell me a story about...?”; however, the narrative interview attempts to give the narrator time to tell their story without being constrained by the listener (researcher). Bauer argues that narrative interviewing emphasises that:

language is the medium of exchange and that this medium is not neutral but constitutes a particular 'world view'. Hence, care needs to be taken not to prescribe the language to be used in the interview (1996, p.3).

This means that the narrators were allowed to speak in their own style and manner, without being ‘structured’ by an interviewer. Because “while stories are obviously not providing a transparent account through which we learn truths” (Holloway and Jefferson, 2000, p.304), stories do allow for us to understand how individuals attempt to project their identities and thus what they see as important, noteworthy and constitutive of their social or political selves.

In this research the interview was seen as an active event (see Gubrium and Holstein in Gubrium and Holstein, 2003, pp.67-81) just as participant observation was, and, as with participant observation, the narrative interviews were aimed at allowing for rich and detailed data rather than purely objective explanation. The interviews contained within this research were understood as Denzin understands interviews:

the interview is not a mirror of the so-called external world... [rather] the interview is a simulacrum, a perfectly miniature and coherent world in its own right... [which] functions as a narrative device (2001, p.25).

3.7 Additional Research

Whilst my primary research consisted of the ethnographic study which incorporated the participant observation and narrative interview, I also relied upon other sources of data. The additional data came via two main sources. The first source was from the EDL’s online presence, from its official internet site to its Facebook and other social media profiles. This data allowed me to analyse the ‘official’ EDL statements and along with the leadership speeches at demonstrations allowed me to gain a perspective on the EDL’s outgoing transmissions, those which the official leadership seek to transmit to current and potential supporters as well as the public at large. It should here be noted that during the course of this research the EDL’s official internet site was closed

down and re-started on at least three occasions and the current EDL website is a much different setup to its previous incarnations.

The second data source was from assorted media stories on the EDL; these provided useful background material and additional information on the EDL, especially from its early period and before I began my research project. As noted above sources that appeared on the EDL website were often frustrating as the website was continually malfunctioning either due to poor maintenance or because of concerted cyber attacks by groups such as Anonymous. This often meant that sources that were on the website would quickly disappear and therefore I logged and printed off every article on the EDL website that was utilised in this study.

All of this data was collected and analysed (where necessary) in the same fashion as the narrative interviews and field work observation. The media sources were not consulted in order to gain opinion, rather, they were utilised in order to present contextual information (e.g. number of individuals at demonstrations). As with the narrative interviews and observation, this additional data was selected and interpreted by myself and thus as with the rest of the research passed through both my initial selection process and my interpretation.

3.8 Ethics

Hamersley has noted that when researchers engage in projects related to “oppositional politics” they should seek to “carry out their work in clear consciousness of its socially situated character” (2007, p.3). This is an important point, as a researcher I am not detached from the social world in which the EDL operates and, at the same time, my research does not exist in isolation from the social arena that it seeks to study. The EDL’s actions cause strong oppositional feelings in many, including myself, yet I felt it important that this work was more than simply a sum total of my opposition to the English Defence League. I therefore attempted from the outset to step out of my own partisanship, this of course is impossible to do in any meaningful way; my beliefs and worldviews and the discourses that structure them cannot be wished away or bracketed off during the research. However, I found that by constantly reminding myself that I wished to ‘understand’ the EDL and those within it I was able to reduce my inherent bias.

In her ethnography of white racist women in America Blee noted the “ethical dilemma of inadvertently providing a platform for racist propaganda” and was concerned that “studies on racist extremists have the power to publicize even as they scrutinize” (2003, p.11). Whilst Blee is right to be cautious, the simple fact is that such groups do exist and there is a requirement to understand them, indeed an understanding of such groups is a prerequisite for normative judgement and collective response. Clearly, an academic work that sought to justify or recommend the EDL as a viable political response would be ethically flawed. Rather an attempt to map the EDL and understand its discourse at least leaves open the possibility of subsequent action to mitigate the excesses of such political projects. Studies of the far right are often openly oppositional; Trilling’s study of the BNP entitled ‘*Bloody Nasty People*’ (2012) is one such example that leaves the reader in little doubt as to the author’s opinion. Yet such journalistic ‘shock strategy’ titles do little to enhance reasoned debate on the topic under discussion. The ultimate arbitrators of the ethical validity of this study will be those who read it and whether or not they feel that the research presented here usefully enhances their understanding of a group that many find frightening and unpalatable.

I also had clear ethical responsibilities towards those who took part in my research, which could possibly represent a conflict of interests with the above ethical considerations that I have towards the wider community. I underwent the University of Birmingham’s ethical review process and this helped ensure that I adhered to key ethical procedures. These procedures are summarised below:

Informed Consent: At the demonstrations it was impossible to gain informed consent from all present, neither was it necessary. The demonstrations are publically advertised, occur in public places, are video recorded by EDL supporters, counter demonstrators and the police and are often attended by members of the press. There is therefore no expectation of privacy or anonymity at these events and thus there was no ethical issue regarding my observation of them without having gained the participants’ informed consent.

Clearly, informed consent was a necessity when engaging with the individual EDL supporters from the local group who actively participated in this study. The British Sociological Society’s code of ethics stresses that “as far as possible participation in ... research should be based on the freely given informed consent of those studied” (BSA, 2002, p.3) and highlights the need to inform “in terms meaningful to participants, what the research is about, who is undertaking

it, why it is being undertaken, and how it is to be disseminated and used” (BSA, 2002, p.3). This is a fundamental for any research project and there was no justification for it not being followed in this particular project.

In practice this required that I fully explained to the nine individuals who agreed to speak to me for this project exactly what I was seeking to do, in this case to understand why people were part of the English Defence League and what they thought about key issues. For this research Adam acted as a facilitator allowing me access to demonstrations and also recommending me to others. It was therefore, either directly or indirectly, through Adam that I met the other eight EDL individuals whose words will be examined in this project. Adam approached several others who did not wish to take part and thus he acted initially as a ‘screening’ mechanism. Once the eight other individuals had agreed I then spoke with them initially online or via telephone and explained in general terms who I was and what I wanted. I then met them face to face at EDL demonstrations where I spoke to them in person, with initial mixed success – a demonstration is not conducive to intimate discussion. The full informed consent was formally gained during the initial one-on-one interviews where consent forms were signed and the study discussed.

Anonymity: The single most important promise that I made to all of the nine individuals who appear in this study was a promise of complete and full anonymity. The only individuals who have not been given anonymity in the pages that follow are those individuals who gave public speeches during demonstrations. These individuals were speaking publically in front of a large crowd whilst being filmed and recorded and therefore it is not necessary to grant these individuals anonymity. The many EDL members who I encountered at demonstrations were unknown to me as I was to them and were simply passing faces in a crowd, when their words appear in these pages it will always be as I reported it in my field notes. I have assigned pseudonyms to the nine narrators who speak at length in this study and have given them my word that they will remain anonymous.

Right to Read: In order to ensure that my transcripts of the interviews had been both accurate and fair I provided the narrators with transcripts of our interviews and other informal discussions that we had had and encouraged them to read these. This ensured that, firstly, they were entirely comfortable with what had been reported (see ‘post interview’ below) and that, secondly, there was a degree of collaboration within the research enabling the narrators to comment

on what had been said before and my analysis of it. The narrators were also given access to the final analysis chapters so that they could see firsthand how the project had interpreted their words and also to allow for a final right of reply if they wished.

Right to Withdraw: Clearly the right to withdraw consent is fundamental to an ethical study and it was made clear to all individuals when they signed consent forms that they could withdraw and have all of their data expunged from the project. As it happened, once the consent was given no individual chose to withdraw, however, it was essential that all knew that withdrawal was a real option. Of course, as a researcher, if an individual had withdrawn that would have been a frustration, but it was imperative to the sound ethical conduct of this project that the right to withdraw was clearly communicated to and known by the individuals.

3.9 Data Analysis

As with any ethnographic study this project generated a significant amount of data, from folders and boxes full of field notes to hundreds of pages of interview transcripts; however, unlike other more quantitative and rigid research methodologies ethnography does not have a clear analysis stage. O'Reilly has noted that in an ethnographic study the "analysis is so tangled up with every stage of the research process that it is difficult to talk of an analysis phase" (2012, Loc. 4008). Analysis is therefore best defined as a process rather than a specific stage. This study began with three research aims that were based upon a discourse theory approach and that required a discourse analysis approach be taken to the data. Throughout the data collection the research aims were slightly modified and the discourse analysis tailored.

The process of analysis within ethnography is best described by LeCompte and Schensul who argue that it achieves three aims:

[1] It brings order to the piles of data that an ethnographer has accumulated. [2] It turns big piles of data into smaller piles of crunched or summarised data. [3] It permits the ethnographer to discover patterns and themes in the data to link with other patterns and themes (1993:p.3).

In the first instance order was brought to the quantity of data by reference firstly to the levels of analysis – micro or meso – and secondly with reference to the

research aims. This provided a clear differentiation of the data and allowed me to prioritise data into one of two initial groups – micro or meso level. As Klandermans and Staggenborg highlight, the level of analysis is a key consideration when engaging in research on social movements (in Klandermans and Staggenborg, 2002, p.xv). The micro level data, information regarding individual demands, motivations and histories, gained primarily but not exclusively from the narrative interviews, was one category. From within this micro level category I was able to draw out data that was pertinent to my first research aim which was:

- Investigate the preconditions that led to the emergence of the EDL as a populist movement

Social demands gave me a unit of analysis that I could base data around and this research question drove my actions during the data gathering. However, this is not a simple research question and the amount of data generated in attempting to address it was significant. Primarily the data came from my nine narrators but did not come in single answer form; instead I had to build profiles of each individual, track the reasons and motivations that they claimed drove their behaviour and from this decipher the data in order to address the question and build from the theory.

The second category was the meso level data, this data being gained primarily, but again not exclusively, from my participant observation of the EDL acting together as a group. This meso level data was directly related to my second and third research questions:

- Examine how the EDL discourse utilised equivalence and antagonism to construct the ‘other’
- Identify the empty signifier that produced equivalence within the EDL identity and identify what impact this empty signifier has on the EDL collective identity

In considering this data I was able to utilise the categories of equivalence and empty signifiers, whilst this was an ongoing process it was easier with every new piece of data. In relation to the process of equivalence I specifically wanted to collect data on the EDL’s attitude towards the ‘other’, how frequently did they talk about antagonistic others during collective gatherings? Who exactly were the ‘others’ and how were they articulated? This data was from participant observation and was further enhanced by the narrative interviews when

individuals talked of these ‘others’ and their feelings towards them. I already had a hypothesis that the empty signifier could be ‘victim(s)’, or possibly, ‘England’ and so I set out to actively find these within the EDL discourse at the collective and also individual level and finally decided that ‘victim(s)’ could be seen as playing the role of empty signifier, as is argued in chapter Six.

In recent years there has been a growing popularity for computer programmes such as SPSS that allow for data organisation, however, whilst such programmes may aid some researchers the use of them can also harm an ethnographic study because they “can cause you to distance yourself too much from your data as you allow the computer to make connections on your behalf” (O’Rielly, 2012, Loc.4218). For an ethnographic study where the vast majority of the data is initially in note or transcript form and in which there is a high degree of nuance that cannot easily be reduced by simple coding I felt that SPSS or other software was an unnecessarily cumbersome tool in which to organise my data. I did, however, make use of a Microsoft search process in order to find key words and phrases within my typed up notes and this allowed me to build up an understanding of the frequency of certain words such as ‘victim(s)’.

I operated a system in which my handwritten notes were typed up, a process that further allowed me to soak up the data. Once typed up my notes were categorised by number and letter with these number letter codes being added to large A1 sheets of paper providing brief descriptors and key highlights - one colour for micro level (red) and another colour (yellow) for meso level. This data was then further sorted into categories based on research questions and other ancillary data that provided contextual description such as information from each demo location. This sorting was an ongoing process throughout the research and allowed me to keep revisiting my data. In addition I created personal files for each of my nine narrators which were added to as more information came out of our narrative interviews and time spent with them at demos; this allowed me to create a mini life history profile for each narrator using their own words and these can be seen in the appendix. Ultimately the analysis was focused on the theory based research aims.

The analysis that makes up the remainder of this study was organised topically into three chapters, with one chapter addressing the first research aim, one chapter addressing the second and one chapter addressing the third. These chapters provide both a discrete analysis of the data based on the analytical concepts provided by discourse theory but also merge together to provide one

single reading of the EDL that takes the reader from initial individual demands and the emergence of the EDL through to the collective identity of the movement and an understanding as to how the EDL discourse developed as it did.

Chapter Four – ‘A Populist Emergence’: Dislocation and Demands

“A social situation in which demands tend to reaggregate themselves on the negative basis that they all remain unsatisfied is the first precondition...of that mode of political articulation that we call populism” (Laclau in Panizzi, 2005, p.37)

“What quickly became clear was that...there was considerable variation in terms of how activists described what it had been about the EDL protest narrative that had initially resonated with them” (Busher, 2015,)

“We ain’t robots, we don’t all think the same. We all have different reasons for joining, I have my reasons, you know my reasons. But we ain’t robots, we have our own minds. What we have in common is knowing what the problem is, who the causes of our problems are... My problems might be different from his problems but we both know the cause” (Adam, interview 2)

Introduction:

This chapter is concerned with the emergence of the English Defence League as a populist movement and will focus its analysis on the two conditions that were necessary for the EDL to come into existence, namely a dislocatory event and the demands that went unfulfilled. It will therefore focus both on the dislocation of existing discourses that emerged after the abuse of British soldiers in Luton in March 2009 and also the unfulfilled social demands that led to individuals feeling a sense of grievance against the institutional system. Empirical evidence from the nine EDL narrators all of whom were involved with the EDL in addition to secondary sources that can shed further light on both dislocation and demands will be drawn upon. As has been noted in chapter Two, the initial emergence of populism, as articulated by Laclau, rests upon a series of heterogeneous demands going unfulfilled (see Laclau, 2014, p.149). However, it will also be argued that the abuse of British service personnel in Luton in 2009 was a dislocatory event that provided a discursive space in which the EDL could emerge. It will be suggested that both the unfulfilled demands and the dislocation of previous discourses were a necessary precondition for the emergence of the English Defence League in the summer of 2009.

We are therefore acknowledging that there were two aspects necessary to the emergence of the EDL: firstly, the dislocatory event that challenged pre-existing discursive constructions of Muslims, the military and the role of the public in ‘defence’ and which led to the EDL becoming a movement and, secondly, the various unfulfilled demands, which were all particular but that were made universal or equivalent, initially having in common the fact that they were all unfulfilled. By examining these the emergence of the EDL in this way this chapter will seek to move away from viewing the movement as being in any sense an inevitable outcome of preconceived and fixed identities and instead will examine the process by which the EDL came into fruition and how and why it took the form that it did. This chapter will therefore form the basis of the initial examination of the EDL and will address the first research aim:

- Investigate the preconditions that led to the emergence of the EDL as a populist movement

This chapter will first highlight the importance of analysing social demands and argue that they are paramount in understanding the success of the EDL as a national movement. The second section of this chapter will highlight the role that dislocation plays in the initial emergence of a populist movement by providing a space for new discourses and understandings to emerge; we will then focus on what can be termed the actual dislocatory event which occurred in Luton in 2009. The chapter will then empirically examine the unfulfilled demands of the EDL narrators who took part in this research in order to demonstrate the complex pathways that led to the EDL becoming a salient movement.

4.1 The Importance of Analysing Social Demands

Laclau is clear about what the initial unit of analysis of populism must be – social demands - arguing that this is because “our starting point should be the isolation of smaller units than the group” (Laclau in Panizzi, 2005, p.34). Therefore, we do not have to begin with the group and work backwards to an assumption of what caused its formation. This is important because Laclau stresses that “the social group is not an ultimately homogeneous referent... [rather] its unity should be conceived as an articulation of heterogeneous demands” (2014, p.148).

As was highlighted during the theoretical discussion of discourse theory in Chapter Two the individual can never possess a full identity owing to the contingency of discourse and thus the impossibility of any discourse, or identity, ever being fully closed. This means that “individuals are not coherent totalities but merely referential identities which have to be split up into a series of localised subject positions” (Laclau in Panizza, 2005, p.35). Hence when the term ‘individual’ is used here on in it refers simply to those individuals who took part in the narrative interviews, the unit of analysis being the demands that are articulated by those subjects rather than the subjects themselves. Put simply we are interested in the demands that went (or were perceived to have gone) unfulfilled and the way in which these demands are articulated. This is because populist movements “emerge out of a situation in which a number of demands coexist within an institutional system that is incapable of satisfying them” (Angosto-Ferrandez, 2013, p.134).

It is here necessary to differentiate between two different types of demands that are conceived of by Laclau, these being democratic demands and popular demands. The precondition for the emergence of populism is that social demands go unfulfilled by the institutional order (power) that is held responsible for fulfilling these demands. When these demands remain unfulfilled and “unchanged for some time” (Laclau, 2007, p.73) they can no longer be dealt with in isolation from one another and in a differential manner; instead they begin to form an equivalence due to their unfulfilled status and these are what Laclau terms popular demands. In contrast to popular demands a democratic demand is a one that never becomes equivalent with other demands and instead remains isolated. It is therefore popular demands that concern us in this chapter as they are the precondition to the formation of a populist movement.

On the surface the EDL grievance and self identity as a movement may appear somewhat straightforward. Its mission statement, prominently displayed on its website and regularly alluded to during the initial growth of the movement, stated that:

The English Defence League (EDL) is a human rights organisation that was founded in the wake of the shocking actions of a small group of Muslim extremists who, at a homecoming parade in Luton (March 2009), openly mocked the sacrifices of our service personnel without any fear of censure. Although these actions were certainly those of a minority, we

believe that they reflect other forms of religiously-inspired intolerance and barbarity that are thriving amongst certain sections of the Muslim population in Britain (EDL Mission Statement, EDL Website, 2010).

This mission statement provides the EDL's public narration of the movement's exact reason for coming into existence. It provides a specific temporal moment which was "*the shocking actions of a small group of Muslim extremists*", and a target for the group's collective action which is "*certain sections of the Muslim population of Britain*". The statement also seeks to draw attention to an institutional failure when it states that the Muslim extremists operated without "*any fear of censure*". The EDL leadership clearly felt in the initial months of the group's formation that a clear and concise narrative was necessary in order to provide direction and clarity to a nascent and rapidly growing movement. The benefit of claiming that a single event – the abuse of British service personnel at a homecoming parade - led to the group's formation are clear; it provided a clear and reified enemy whose deeds were the reason for the group's formation and it provided a justificatory framework for EDL collective action being seen as 'defensive'. However, this conciseness belies the true complexity of the formation of such a populist social movement and is further undermined by the EDL's attempts to draw on wider discontent, as we shall examine in the next chapter.

Whilst it is true that the EDL was formed in Luton in 2009 following the homecoming incident it quickly became a national movement which drew in support from many other local regions; whilst the abuse of British service personnel created a dislocation, because the event could not easily be fitted into readily available discourses such a singular event is not the sole driving force for a national movement; no matter how much the EDL leadership may have claimed that it was after the fact. As Rude has noted a crowd may come together in popular collective action:

because it is hungry or fears to be so, because it has some deep social grievance, because it seeks an immediate reform or the millennium, or because it wants to destroy an enemy or acclaim a "hero"; ***but it is seldom for any single one of these alone*** (Rude, 1964, p.217, emphasis mine).

By focusing on social demands it is possible to examine the specific pathways that led to the discontent that individuals felt and that were therefore the preconditions for the emergence of the group. Even if the movement may claim

single issue status that does not mean that there was a single pathway to its formation or that it was based upon a singular demand. Slavoj Žižek has, however, countered this reading and has argued that such single issue movements do “not seem to rely on a complex chain of equivalences” but instead are “focused on one single demand” (cited in Laclau, 2014, p.148).

Žižek’s counter argument thus suggests that a populist single issue movement can be driven by a single particular demand, however, this understanding is reductionist and fails to distinguish between cause and effect. A populist movement does not come into being with a fully formed identity and purpose; rather it develops these through a process which constructs a collective identity. That the collective identity has coalesced around one single issue does not mean that the demands that led to the possibility of its formation are equally singular; it simply means that many particular demands have been unified around one universal signification. As Laclau observes in response to Žižek:

The ostensive issue might be particular, but it is only the tip of an iceberg. Behind the individual issue, a much wider world of associations and effects contaminate it and transform it into the expression of much more general trends...the latent meaning of a mobilization can never be read of its literal slogans and proclaimed aims (2014, p.150).

We can therefore argue the importance of understanding the social demands for two reasons: firstly, because they are a fundamental precondition for the emergence of a populist movement and, secondly, because by fully understanding the social demands we can appreciate the complexity of the reasons that lay behind the emergence of the English Defence League. Before turning to an interrogation of these specific demands it is first necessary to examine another aspect that was necessary for the emergence of the EDL – dislocation.

4.2 Dislocation of Existing Discourses

If a populist movement requires that demands go unfulfilled as a precondition of emergence we can also expect that there is a challenge to the dominant hegemonic discourses and that this challenge opens up new possibilities for new discursive constructions which further engenders a populist emergence. If unfulfilled demands operate on the micro level, then discursive challenges can

be seen as operating at a broader societal level. In Chapter Two the concept of dislocation was discussed, put simply, dislocation occurs when existing discourses can no longer represent or explain new events or phenomenon and therefore new discursive possibilities, and thus identities, emerge. Because of the contingency of the discursive, discourses are constantly being reiterated, however, at certain temporal moments this reiteration is not possible and the discourse becomes dislocated. At this point new discursive possibilities emerge and therefore the process of dislocation is a threat to existing identities but also the beginning of a process that constructs new identities (Laclau, 1990, p.36).

As has been argued above the event that, according to the EDL narrative, led to the group's formation was the abuse of British soldiers by a small group of Islamist extremists in Luton on 10 March 2009. Whilst this chapter will argue that there were many unfulfilled demands that made a populist protest movement a viable outcome and that this event was certainly not the only precondition of the EDL's emergence it was, nonetheless, a crucial event in the dislocation of existing discourses and served as an event that challenged pre-existing taken for granted hegemonic discourses. In short, the events in Luton in March 2009 were part of the populist emergence that provided the right preconditions for the EDL to develop in the way in which it did.

In the immediate aftermath of the events of 10th March 2009 a number of small localised groups emerged in order to 'fight back' against those who had disrespected the service personnel. It was from the actions of these groups and from the localised events that took place immediately after 10th March that the EDL emerged as a national populist movement. Whilst the EDL tapped into many more heterogeneous issues than this single event, the event was important in highlighting the dislocation of existing discourses and provided a discursive space for the EDL to emerge. It is therefore important that we examine the period immediately after 10th March in Luton in some detail.

We have already identified that for Laclau "the making of political identities involves linking particular interests to wider, more universal social aims" (Worsham and Olson, 1999, p.164); in that vein the events that occurred in Luton are important for examining how a particular initial event became linked to much broader, universalistic arguments. More importantly, we can examine the event as a point of dislocation. According to Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory, during a period of dislocation 'myths' can emerge that attempt to form "a new objectivity by means of the rearticulation of the dislocated elements"

(Laclau, 1990, p.61); thus new subject positions emerge and with these the possibility of a new hegemonic vision.

In his later work on the subject of populism Laclau seldom refers to 'dislocation', a concept which looms large within his and Mouffe's earlier work, yet this does not mean that we should not use the concept in this study. Laclau does, however, make some reference to dislocation in *On Populist Reason* when discussing two dimensions of populism which for Laclau are:

on the one hand, the attempt to break with the status quo, with the preceding institutional order; on the other, the effort to constitute an order where there was anomie and dislocation (2007, p.122).

If we incorporate these two dimensions into an empirical analytic framework we can study these two separate but related aspects of a populist emergence both as a challenge to the institutional system and from the crisis event(s) that precipitated the dislocation of a discourse. It is here argued that to fully understand the conditions that were a pre-requisite for the emergence of the EDL as a populist movement we need to acknowledge both the heterogeneous demands that went unfulfilled and the crisis event that precipitated a dislocation. It is to this crisis event that will now be examined.

4.3 Dislocation – 10th March 2009

As has been described above, a dislocation is, at its most basic level:

an event that cannot immediately be integrated into the horizon of expectations: it is something we did not expect and which therefore threatens the sedimented routines and processes of social institutions (Marchart, 2014, p.277).

The events of the 10th March 2009 can be seen as just such a dislocatory event, when British soldiers, newly returned from a tour of duty in Iraq marched through the streets of Luton to what was expected to be a heroes' welcome and which instead turned into a very public clash of understandings and identities. Whilst many members of the public acted in the expected and customary manner, waving Union Jack flags and applauding as the soldiers of 2nd Battalion Royal Anglian Regiment marched past, acknowledging the soldiers' courage; a small but very noticeable group of men had a very different message for the

soldiers. Waving placards proclaiming ‘Anglian Soldiers: Butchers of Basra’ and ‘Anglian Soldiers: cowards, killers, extremists’ the twenty or so men linked to the banned Islamist extremist group, ‘Al Muhajiroun’ (The Telegraph, 11th March 2009, accessed online) successfully disrupted the parade and drew significant attention to their message.

During the protest there were chaotic scenes as members of the public clashed with the protesters and the police attempted to maintain public order. These events were recounted in some detail by a former long term member of the English Defence League who has written a book, under the pseudo name of ‘Billy Blake’, on the subject. The sight of British soldiers being abused caused an initial shock to those present; one eyewitness described the event, “I thought it was cheering at first. Then I realised, no, something’s not right. When the penny’s dropped I look up and there’s the banners” (Blake, 2011, p.12). This initial shock quickly turned to angry confrontation that was eventually brought under control with the arrest of two members of the public and a significant police presence. However, over the next few days as news of the protest and aftermath spread via both traditional and social media these localised events soon presented a wider challenge to the contemporaneous discourse. National newspaper headlines such as ‘Luton: The Enemy Within’ (Independent, 12 March 2009) and even local newspaper headlines from other localities such as ‘Luton Protest: An Insult to our Soldiers’ (The Yorkshire Post, 11th March 2009) ensured widespread attention, a statement from Prime Minister Gordon Brown and a national conversation regarding the event in Luton.

That the 10th March 2009 protest was an important event in the EDL’s self narrative has been highlighted above in the EDL’s Mission Statement, however, it was also referred to by this study’s individual EDL narrators. Even over four years later, the fact that British troops could be abused on the streets of an English town was an important reference frame for many of the narrators, with the soldiers cast in the image of ‘victims’. It is not surprising that Adam, who had himself been in the military, saw the EDL’s activity and his involvement with the movement as coloured by this event. During one interview with Adam we spoke about this event:

Adam: It was disgusting, that they can be in this country and disrespect us so much. Not just the lads they was shouting at but all of us and all of our grandparents who had been in the army. They insulted them all, but especially the soldiers in Luton, shouting and screaming at them.

Me: Were they having a go at the soldiers themselves or was it more of a political protest against the government though?

Adam: Of course it was against the troops, they called them butchers and child killers, that's personal and I hate it, I hate them [the protesters]. What happens in their countries, the rape and the abuse by their cops and their soldiers against their own people and they come over here and say those things to our lads. I've been over there, I've served and we don't kill fucking kids, we don't butcher the fuckers. We have rules of engagement, we have honour. And these lot who come and shout at us on the streets, they have no honour they aint British (Adam, interview 1).

Even though none of the narrators had been directly present in Luton in March 2009 what had happened there was well known and had shaped their views on what EDL direct action was seeking to achieve. Eve also referenced the event; she did not know anyone who was currently serving in the military and yet she seemed to have taken personal offence to what had happened: she told me that:

it makes me so angry, so annoyed that these Muslims are allowed to abuse what is best about Britain. Our army is brave and those scum were protected by the police, they were allowed to scream at our soldiers while the police arrested the ones that tried to defend our soldiers. It just showed me how wrong our country is, how messed up we are (Eve, interview 1).

For Harry the abuse of British soldiers was comparable to the London terror attacks of 2007, indeed, he seemed to find the events in Luton even more shocking:

Me: [referring to a comparison between the London terror attacks and the Luton events] I mean, I suppose a major difference is that no one was killed, you know, nobody was injured or killed in Luton. It was simply words, it was a protest. It wasn't a crime or a terror attack like 7/7, it wasn't violent in that sense.

Harry: Yeah, yeah, but that's, that's not the point. In Luton they attacked soldiers, they showed they aren't scared of soldiers, of police, of the British people who were there. It just shows they think they have us beaten. The army should be smashing them, not marching past in silence whilst they are being abused. It's, it's sick, they are allowed to rip apart the best that we have and we just stand there and the police protect them. Absolute

cowards. Complete cowards. Soldiers are heroes and the police let it happen, when they needed help, they got none. Nothing... [long pause]... cowards (Harry, interview 2).

This demonstrates how problematic the event in Luton was. Harry strongly objected not only to the fact that soldiers were verbally abused but also to the fact that he perceived that the state authority (the police) allowed this attack to happen. This certainly resonates with both the EDL mission statement and with what Blake says in his book, that the abuse of British soldiers was a moment that was seen as transformative. Whilst a terror attack is horrific it is relatively clear cut, our enemies have attacked us and the state authorities and the people stand together in condemnation of the perpetrators. However, when the soldiers were abused, despite it being seen as a shocking and terrible event for some members of the public the police did not intervene and instead were perceived to have acted to protect those protesting by arresting two members of the public who were confronting the protesters. Therefore the event became not just shocking but disruptive to common-sense and taken-for-granted understandings because of the ambiguity of the response from state actors and also because the ‘hero’ status of British soldiers was being called into question.

In addition to being difficult to comprehend the event has led to an almost pathological mistrust of the police within the EDL and an image of British soldiers as needing protecting from decent people against the ‘enemy within’. This may, taken at face value, seem somewhat contradictory for a populist movement to have such negative attitudes towards one element of the state apparatus (the police) and yet hold such a positive attitude towards another element (the military) but is not surprising when we acknowledge that the EDL was formed through unique and spontaneous circumstances rather than being an inevitable outcome of class based marginalisation.

In the immediate aftermath of the 10th March a series of protests were planned; these were organised by “a fairly loose network of bloggers, commentators, small groups, and intellectuals mobilising... in collaboration with a group of Lutonians calling themselves United People of Luton” (Busher, 2015, Loc.239). What is immediately obvious is that the events in Luton had caught the attention of what can loosely be termed the ‘counter Jihad’ movement that was already in existence before the events but which lacked any real public interest or support outside of a small hardcore of adherents. However, the United People of Luton was a local grassroots movement which provided the counter Jihad nexus with a

‘boots on the ground’ resource. The abuse of British troops had provided a unique circumstance that allowed for the linking together of the organised counter Jihad nexus with local public support due to the anger caused by the protest and thus drew in larger numbers than the counter jihad movement could ever have hoped to achieve alone and by May 2009 protests in Luton had attendances of 500 people or more.

From the very beginning, when local Lutonians confronted the protesters, there was a strong narrative of ‘defence’ and ‘protection’. The fact that British soldiers were perceived to have become public victims of an extremist protest disrupted common sense understandings of the discourse surrounding the military. Also, the fact that the police were perceived to have allowed the protesters to abuse the soldiers, or in the later words of the EDL, that the protesters were allowed to abuse British soldiers “*without any fear of censure*”, (EDL Mission Statement) also disrupted narratives surrounding wider British civic values. Specifically, this protest can be seen to have dislocated discursive understandings of military values, masculinity and victimisation and also posed a challenge to understandings with regards to the role of the police.

That the event was so disruptive is not surprising; Duncanson has found that there is traditionally a “hegemony of...’warrior’ masculinity” (2009, p.73) within discourses surrounding the British Army and this highlights the ‘heroic’ understandings of British military personnel. Thus, a public homecoming parade of troops dressed in full battledress, marching in step, can be seen as an overt display of military prowess. It is also a public opportunity for grateful civilians to express their gratitude for the deeds performed by the troops and their wider role as martial defenders of the nation. This discursive understanding of the military at such a homecoming parade certainly did not leave space to understand the soldiers as victims; rather they would be portrayed as heroic warriors who were detached from both the international and domestic political scene with their martial deeds being lauded by the public. However, as the first cries of ‘Murderers’, ‘Terrorists’ and ‘Butchers’ rang out this taken for granted understanding was quickly disrupted.

The attack on British soldiers on parade in full uniform disrupted the discourse of the soldier as warrior and led to members of the public feeling that they needed to physically ‘defend’ the soldiers against the protesters, this was somewhat of a role reversal, with the public defending the military. However, such action is hardly surprising given the high level of support for the British

military amongst the general public at large, with research conducted by Hines et al finding that 83 per cent of the British public stated that they had “a high or a very high opinion of the UK Armed Forces” (2014, p.8). This high level of support is further reinforced by a report from the British Social Attitudes survey, which found that 75 per cent of respondents have “a great deal of respect” for the Armed Forces and with just 2 per cent of respondents having “not a lot of respect” (BSA 29, accessed online).

What we can here clearly see is the predominant role that the ‘victim’ image played within the initial reaction to the Luton event, with the heroic soldier image being challenged and with local Lutonians feeling the need to defend these soldiers who were perceived as being doubly victimised. Firstly, they were seen as victimised by the Islamist extremists abuse and threats and, secondly, by the perceived collusion with, or at least inaction against those extremists by the police. In Blake’s words, this led to local people taking to the streets “*believing it was their duty to respond and defend the soldiers*” (2011, p.2).

It was thus against this narrative backdrop that the English Defence League was formed, merging a variety of smaller groups such as the ‘United People of Luton’ and ‘Casuals United’, and, unsurprisingly, the word ‘Defence’ was incorporated into this new group’s title. We can therefore see how the original dislocatory event created the necessary discursive space for a new movement to articulate meanings, seeking to ‘defend’ what they held to be sacred against a ‘Muslim’ other who was seen as an existential threat. It also planted the seeds of the group’s antagonism towards police and central authorities who were seen as being at least complicit in allowing the ‘Muslim’ other to threaten that which needed to be defended.

Such crisis events as occurred in Luton precede the emergence of populist movements and such crisis events are “often sparks for populism” (Mizuno and Phongpaichit, 2009, p.4). Whilst the type of specific crisis event will undoubtedly serve to provide the unique flavour for the specific populist group that it gives rise to, the crisis event itself cannot be objectively graded in terms of severity, rather it is simply enough that it be perceived as a crisis and that it disrupts and challenges pre-existing discursive understandings. Thus, the crisis is narrated as a perceived failure that cannot be adequately resolved or understood within existing discourses. Hay notes that “crises are representations and hence ‘constructions’ of failure” and that there can be “a multiplicity of

conflicting narratives of crisis” (1996, p.255). The EDL’s construction of crisis was not the only construction of the Luton event but it nonetheless held resonance and became a reference frame for EDL members to challenge the dominant authority. Such constructions of crisis can lead the dominant authority to “lose their power to organise political discourse” (Panizza, 2005, p.12) and thus a space is created for new discursive understanding to be constructed by the populist movement.

Luton was a trigger event for the EDL’s emergence onto both the streets, and, onto the wider British political scene, however, this was not the only precondition for the emergence of the EDL as a national populist movement; diverse social demands, perceived as going unfulfilled, were also a prerequisite for the emergence of the EDL.

4.4. Unfulfilled Demands

Laclau’s discourse theoretical approach to studying populism allows for an analysis that goes beyond the essentialist understandings of the EDL provided by authors such as Garland and Treadwell who view the EDL as being predicated on pre-existing a priori class based issues (Treadwell and Garland, 2011). By focusing on the heterogeneous demands that existed as a precondition for the emergence of the EDL we do not fall into the trap of reductionism. By listening to and analysing the discrete demands that the individual narrators felt had gone unfulfilled, and which thus existed as potential for a populist movement to emerge at this point we can trace the development of the EDL through the logic of equivalence, the formation of antagonism and the construction of empty signifiers. In keeping with discourse theory’s ontology we can assert that no group’s identity exists a priori, rather it forms through a process of identification, and for a populist movement the initial unit of analysis for examining this process are initial demands that were perceived as going unfulfilled.

It has already been acknowledged that for Laclau populism emerges when disconnected social demands form through the logic of equivalence into a universal demand. It has also been stated that demands that remain isolated or which are perceived to have been addressed do not predicate the emergence of populism, only popular demands that are perceived to have gone unfulfilled can be unified via the logic of equivalence. It is vital to study these initial popular

demands because these “demands are advanced ‘on the ground’...and are then welded together into an anti-establishment project” (Griggs and Howarth in Papanagnou, 2011, p.136). It is therefore necessary to discover what those demands were because they will necessarily affect the type of populist movement that emerges. This point has been stressed by Miscoiu et al in their discourse analysis of the populism of the *Front National* and *Lijst Pim Fortuyn*, in which they argue that in order to understand the antagonism inherent within populist movements there must be an understanding of demands because “each [group’s] identity is the expression of unfulfilled social demands” (2008, p.67).

The narrative interviews that were conducted during this research allowed the narrators to articulate their perceptions of life in contemporary Britain, including their grievances, and allowed them to discuss in great detail and in their own language problems that they perceived they faced prior to the formation of the English Defence League. Unsurprisingly, as participants in a confrontational protest group such as the EDL, all of the narrators expressed dissatisfaction with numerous aspects of contemporary British society and their personal circumstances. This made identifying specific demands quite difficult in the initial instance, a general feeling of dissatisfaction, anger, or annoyance do not meet the criteria of a demand.

In order to identify specific demands from the narrators this work has constructed a simple three stage based upon Laclau’s description of demands, for a complaint or issue to be identified as a demand it must meet all stages of the criteria. Firstly, it must be a specific demand that cannot be “self satisfied but has to be addressed to an instance different from that within which the demand was originally formulated” (Laclau in Panizza, 2005, pp.35-36); thus the demand must be directed towards some ‘other’ authority who is held responsible for fulfilling it. Secondly, there must be a perception on the part of the narrator that the demand has not been fulfilled punctually and therefore “a situation of social frustration” (Laclau in Panizza, 2005, p.36) will have occurred in which the narrator holds the authority responsible for not fulfilling the demand. Thirdly, because demands are a precondition of a populist emergence the demand must have existed prior to the formation of the EDL. I thus had to ensure that I had a rough temporal period for each demand.

Some narrators were able to be specific and identify significant issues that met the criteria of demands, other narrators were more inclined to discuss their concerns in more general terms. However, due to the depth allowed by an

unstructured narrative interview I was able to identify specific issues that fitted the criteria of demands in all nine narrators. This meant that we were able to discuss specific issues that were pertinent to each narrator, rather than just discussing their feelings in terms of a general social malaise. The narrative interviews thus featured as brief life histories in which the narrator's hopes and fears were discussed and from that information I could focus in on the specific demands.

Whilst some demands were incredibly specific to one narrator based on particular individual or local issues, some narrators had similar demands to other narrators. Whilst all demands were in some sense particular, belonging to the individual narrators, certain broad themes began to emerge. This has allowed for a thematic study of narrator demands focused around three broad categories of 'welfare', 'safety' and 'identity'. Such an approach allows us to see some commonalities within the demands and to see how the EDL's emergence was coloured by such demands whilst also acknowledging the uniqueness and particularity of each individual demand. This approach is different to Busher's approach, which focuses on categorising individuals into pre-existing groups and then examining each specific groups pathway into the EDL, such an approach assumes pre-existing a-priori group identities. In contrast, by examining demands we can understand why the narrators were susceptible to the EDL's populist discourse without assuming fixed a-priori identities. What was particularly interesting was that most narrators had multiple demands, which suggest multiple issues arising from different subject positions, and points to a more complex social pattern than the class based disaffection approach of Treadwell and Garland or Busher's group based approach. We will look at the three categories in detail in the sections below but here is a brief outline of each demand category:

1. Welfare demands – These being specific demands made against authorities (local/central government) comprising of issues related directly to the welfare state (benefits/social housing etc) and indirectly to the welfare state (lack of investment in local area/closing of local community amenities, lack of employment opportunities/schooling etc)
2. Safety demands – These being specific demands made against authorities (central government and police) concerning both physical safety of the individual and family or friends and/or physical safety of the nation.

3. Identity demands – These being demands made against authorities (central and local government) regarding the perceived loss of or challenge to narrators' sense of personal/local/national identity.

Conducting these narrative interviews and analysing these demands in detail not only allowed for a theoretical understanding of the EDL but it also made my attitude to the English Defence League shift somewhat. I had been on EDL demonstrations and had been shocked by the levels of aggression often displayed. However, by listening to the narrators and considering in detail their demands during the research process I began to have a much fuller understanding of why they acted as they did. For me as a researcher, grasping these demands was a turning point because by identifying the narrators' demands I was able to develop a level of empathy with them that I had not previously been able to achieve.

This empathy allowed me to acknowledge the narrators as subjects who felt deeply about their concerns, rather than simply participants in an EDL mob. This was, of course, extremely beneficial for me as a researcher because it enhanced my understanding and analysis of the EDL but it also made me as a person feel deeply conflicted. The EDL was, after all, a group that I had long personally opposed. I have decided to copy verbatim a note I wrote in my research journal on 17th April 2014 because it describes the conflict that I began to feel as I started to empathise with some individuals who were part of a group that I had wholly negative feelings towards.

After witnessing the nastiness of EDL demonstrations, with screaming abuse, unpleasant slogans and some physical threat, I have previously found nothing at all to like about the EDL. But now the more time I am spending with the guys, listening to them, knowing their stories, I think I am now coming to understand these demonstrations and I am finding myself increasingly feeling sympathy towards them [the narrators], especially Fiona . Does this make me a bad person? All I can be sure about is that I do feel for them. Should I hate them? Is it right or wrong to empathise? I don't know.

Welfare Demands

Whilst there was considerable divergence between the narrators in terms of their backgrounds, their upbringings and their current employment and financial situations they all articulated some form of welfare demands; whether these be

directly aimed at the welfare state in terms of benefits or more indirect demands such as those pertaining to schooling and community amenities within the local area. Because the nine narrators all had different circumstances and were not all from the same geographic location we can expect differences in these particular demands, however, by grouping welfare demands together we can also see some similarities in terms of their demands against the dominant authorities.

Whilst welfare demands were clearly the most important for four of the narrators, the other five narrators also expressed some limited welfare demands although these tended to focus on indirect fairness issues (related to a perception that some people were getting more welfare rights than others). As one would expect, concerns over welfare were strongest amongst the narrators who relied on direct welfare to support themselves and their families.

Ian had perhaps the most wide ranging demands related to welfare issues and certainly, qualitatively the most welfare demands. Coming from a single parent family, raised by his mother, and spending much of his adult life requiring direct state assistance he also, arguably, had had the most exposure to the contemporary welfare system. What struck immediately with Ian was his anger at how the system works and a sense of injustice at his and his mother's treatment at the hands of the welfare state. At the age of thirty two, Ian had been unemployed for around four years, having previously worked as a gardener, a window cleaner and as a labourer on a construction site; he had no formal educational qualifications. It was initially difficult to identify specific demands because of the miasma that surrounded our conversations about his life and experiences with the welfare system. Ian was often very defensive and would talk in a meandering and difficult to follow speech pattern.

I had initially met Ian at EDL demonstrations where he would occasionally organise the distribution of flags, masks and other demo necessities. He had attempted to become an EDL 'steward', responsible for maintaining discipline and order during demonstrations but had been unsuccessful. This was perhaps not surprising given the level of his anger at demonstrations, often hiding his face behind either an England scarf or sometimes a pig mask. He would sometimes engage in behaviour such as throwing missiles at shop windows, counter demonstrators and police and told me that he had been arrested. During the first narrative interview the atmosphere was tense, indeed during all of our contacts the atmosphere was never particularly comfortable and Ian was perhaps one of the narrators that I found it hardest to feel empathy for. I was also always

concerned that he would take offence at my questions. This led to very long periods of him expressing his anger, especially towards what he perceived to be his unfair treatment at the hands of local and central government. This extract is entirely typical of many of our conversations:

I worked before, you know, with a brickie, just labouring for him you know. He had a gang of five of us working on a site, but these Poles, these fucking Poles they came in and undercut him, yeah. So that was our job gone you know. Back down the job centre for me [laughs], they treat you like shit, she says [staff member in Job Centre] “How have you found yourself out of work”, something like that, anyway, and I told her, I said because we keep getting undercut by the fucking poles. She didn’t like that, but they don’t want to help people like me. Indigenous whites like me we are scum as far as they are concerned. I had to wait years to get a council flat, I was living with me mom and trying to move out but a single white bloke, no chance. They prefer to give the flats to the Pakis and that lot, family of Ummar Khans or whatever move over here, they get the lot, me I get fuck all... And when they do find me a flat it don’t feel like it’s in my own country, just look round here and tell me we are in fucking England [laughs]... Me moms place is nearly as bad, the council will let her rot in that house and then move in some more fucking Pakis. Her house is falling to bits and they don’t wanna know you know. I tell you, be white and try and get help from the council round here, no help you know, no fucking help. Try and work, like I try and work you know but if you, if you, can’t find work and then no help, they would rather help the Pakis and the Poles who send all their money up back home (Ian, Interview 2).

Buried within the casual racism and aggressive xenophobia expressed here, there resides some real and genuine demands against the system, demands that as far as Ian was concerned had gone punctually unfulfilled. The most obvious demand relates to social housing or, more correctly, the lack of decent social housing. The earliest specific demand that we can identify from Ian related to his inability to get a council house; because of his precarious employment, having to rely on relatively low paid short term manual labour he was unable to purchase or privately rent his own home and thus relied upon the benefit system and more specifically the social housing system. He had therefore been living for several years in his mother’s one bed ground floor flat, sleeping on a sofa bed. Ian explained the situation in more detail:

Ian: I lived with a girl when I was like 19 you know, we lived at her old man's house. It was good there you know compared to me mom's house where we was when we were kids... But we split up and I had nowhere to go, I slept on mates floors, on anybody's floors, anywhere for weeks you know. My mom had been shifted into a flat because we had all [Ian and his siblings] moved out. So she had a flat and she, she says, you had better move back and sleep here short term, until you find somewhere. Fucking short term [laughs], I was there for six years you know. I tried renting for a few months when I was window cleaning but it was a dump, this paki landlord, he was either a paki or Turk, fucking rented it off him and he screwed me over so it was back to mom.

Me: And you had applied for social housing? What I mean is you had put your name down on the council waiting list for a council property?

Ian: Yeah, yeah, I did that when I was with my Beck [ex-girlfriend] at her dad's house but I did it again when we split. But single white bloke, no chance even if you am working an am trying to earn dosh. Families of pakis, yeah, they say 'please come on over and have a house' [said in an imitation posh voice] but not for me.

Me: I suppose they have to prioritise families and what not, because they are seen as more vulnerable if they have children.

Ian: Fuck that, eight years I waited for a flat, well, well, six years I waited on my own for a flat. And they give me one, they fucking give me this shit hole and they say "you are lucky to have gotten one this quickly given your circumstances", they fucking said that. Look at this place [he gestures with to the small room that we are in], they say I should be lucky to have this in my own country when I work and pay my way when I can. Six years living in me mom's front room, living on my boys' [friends] floors. It aint my fault that work's shit you know, I can't help that I aint rich. But I should be happy with this, six fucking years for this shit man and they give it to the foreigners for nothing (Ian, Interview 2).

What we can identify here is a specific demand from Ian. It meets the three criteria that we set out above in that it is a specific request made of an authority who is held responsible for providing Ian a property. Housing benefit was not an option as he was single and under thirty five and thus not eligible for housing benefit for a flat or house. He waited six years to be provided with social

housing. For Ian this six year wait means that his request became a demand which was not punctually fulfilled; instead he spent six years living in the lounge of his mother's ground floor flat, leaving once to try and privately rent but soon returning. This situation began between 2003 and 2004 and was thus prior to the formation of the EDL. Further to this demand he also lists other issues with social housing that are clearly linked to this demand, firstly the quality of his mom's social housing flat and secondly the quality of his own. These together are at the root of his aggression towards central and local government and as we have seen above are linked to his racism.

It should be noted that Ian was by far the most aggressive and overtly racist of all the narrators and it is perhaps likely that he would have held racist views regardless of his specific demands. However, what the above shows is that his demands were directly linked to his antagonism towards those he saw as 'being given stuff' ahead of himself. More importantly for the emergence of populism, it led to him identifying the dominant authority (central and local government) as being responsible for this perceived lack. It was not only the immigrant 'others' that were responsible, indeed, it was the government who had allowed this situation to occur in Ian's opinion. It is not altogether surprising that housing concerns coalesce into specific demands against the authorities as Manoochehri states:

there is a critical shortage of housing in England for people who need it. The reduction of the pool of housing stock available to local authorities...has meant that there is a greater demand for what is available. Those who cannot purchase what is available on the market remain in unsuitable or overcrowded housing, or become homeless (2012, p.1).

Such a situation provides a fertile ground in which individuals' demands against the system go punctually unfulfilled and thus produces a perception that the establishment is failing in its role. Ian was not the only narrator to identify specific housing welfare demands; each case was unique but yet resulted in unfulfilled demands. Fiona was a single mother of two young children, both under the age of eleven and worked part time as a care worker in an elderly persons' home and lived in fairly basic privately rented accommodation whilst being in receipt of housing benefit. She had previously been evicted from one property after refusing to pay the rent due to the condition of the property and had spent time in emergency accommodation before finding a new rental property. However, she had continued to have problems in this new property.

Our first interview was conducted in a small cafe by her house but for the second interview she invited me into the house. Several of the rooms had extensive damp, two windows would not shut and the banister on the stairs was badly damaged. She explained that this was an improvement on her previous rented conditions:

That place [previous rented accommodation] was so bad. It just wasn't fit for us to live in, it made me ill. I only had Ben at the time, he was coughing all the time, the doctor said it was the damp what did it. He has asthma now and I think it's what did it to him. Landlord just ignored me... council just ignored me, they paid some of the costs for us to rent it but they weren't arsed that the conditions were so bad. In the end I just stopped paying the rent, got put in emergency accommodation...Now I am in here [new private rented accommodation], its better but not much better, I mean, just, just look at it there [points to the damp and mould], tell me that's okay? They just don't give a damn do they? (Fiona, Interview 2).

Because of the poor conditions she had experienced over almost a decade in privately owned rented accommodation Fiona had made several requests for social housing in addition to the complaints she had made regarding the poor state of her rented accommodation. She felt that her request for social housing was, like her complaints about her accommodation, not being taken seriously because she was a working single mother:

If I was just sitting on my backside like some people I know then I would be in a better, a better erm position, a better situation. When I walk Ben to school in the morning, sometimes I've been working all night and the boys have been with their Nan. Anyway, if I hadn't bothered then they [the council/government] would have to house me properly, I see moms in their PJ's [pyjamas], they don't bother working, they do better than me. I just get given some cash towards me house, they get the house, they must get the house, because they don't ever work so they can't contribute towards it. But they [the council/government] are not interested in me, just let me keep working, keep living in a dump and keep ignoring me (Fiona, Interview 2)

Whether or not Fiona's position would have improved if she had decided to give up working is obviously not the issue here, the issue is that her perception is that she is being ignored by the authorities and being denied access to

services that she feels others are being allowed access to. Thus, her requests for full social housing and for her complaints relating to her private accommodation to be dealt with have instead turned into unfulfilled demands against the established authorities who she perceives to be denying her access to certain services. These demands were further strengthened with her experiences with her children's school and her relationships with her neighbours. Living in a relatively deprived inner-city area many of Fiona's neighbours were from ethnic minorities and her children's school was an equally diverse place and this led to other separate but linked demands.

For Fiona, the ethnic diversity of her area and her children's school appeared to be proof that *"those who aint been born here are being given things that the council won't do for me, they send their kids to school and don't work"* (Fiona, Interview 1). This is, of course, linked to Fiona's previous demand regarding her accommodation and her desire for social housing. However, her experience with her eldest son's nursery and primary school can be seen as providing a separate discrete welfare demand, separate from the housing demand.

It was clear from speaking to Fiona at length that she was a devoted and hard working mother, however, she also seemed somewhat permanently overwhelmed with her role as a working mother. She had been happy when her eldest son started primary school, giving her a chance to work more hours in the residential home. However, this had not been as straight forward as it may have been because her son had not taken to school particularly well, he had not thrived in the ethnically diverse class and had fallen out with class mates. Fiona felt that the school had punished her son whilst 'going easy' on other pupils who were from ethnic minorities, she told me that:

It's a bad school anyway... A lot of the kids don't speak English and Ben was just over his head. He had problems, because a lot of them don't speak English. I couldn't believe it, this is a government school, not a private school, it's a government school and my Ben was in the minority. He had a hard time of it, a very hard time. Of course they [the school] didn't care about it. They saw him as a pain and me as white scum I suppose, that's how they see me, that's how they always treat me. I tried changing him schools but they put up obstacles every which way, I kept on at them. Didn't get anywhere, so he stayed and hated it, I hated it (Fiona, Interview 1).

During my conversations with Fiona I was left with this sense of a person who simply felt ignored, perhaps more so than any other narrator. Fiona tried to challenge what she perceived as issues and problems through the appropriate channels but never really achieved anything and this left her with the utmost frustration. Whilst all popular demands must, characteristically, be punctually unfulfilled, with Fiona this punctual lack had extended over a period of a decade of regular conflict with the established authorities. She thus began to see the entire establishment as a single entity that existed to ignore and frustrate her, from not providing her social housing, to ignoring her complaints about her private landlord to frustrating her attempts to remove her child from school.

For Fiona all of these perceived unfulfilled demands were separate but also linked, because they made her believe that the powers that be – the state in general – was deliberately ignoring what she perceived to be her legitimate requests and thus they morphed into unfulfilled demands and consequently Fiona felt a great sense of what Laclau terms “social frustration” (Laclau in Panizza, 2005, p.36). This social frustration was best articulated by Fiona in our second meeting when she showed me around her house:

I know what it is, I can see it clear from a mile away. They have me down as a trouble maker, I keep on at them, I have always fought my corner but they keep ignoring me... I will keep on at them though and if enough of us join together then they can't ignore me, well us, they can't ignore us all (Fiona, Interview 2).

This intense feeling of social frustration is something that develops over a protracted temporal period, sometimes encompassing several demands as with Fiona, but can also be the result of one single request that has gone unfulfilled as with Harry. In his early thirties, and having had a keen interest in politics all of his adult life, Harry was one of the most politically articulate of the narrators and had worked as a salesman for a metal fabrication company in the Midlands since leaving education at eighteen. After around eight years working for the company he was made redundant after the business was sold. At first he was confident that he would find another sales based role quickly, however, when that didn't happen he was forced to seek state assistance. During an interview he described his first trip to the job centre and it was clear that it was a difficult subject for him to discuss openly:

Harry: It would have been 2007 or maybe 2008, no, no, I think it was 2008, yeah 2008. I had been out of work for months, a long time, I had never been out of work, I had a paper round as a kid and when I was 16 I worked in a cafe in college and then I landed that job after college, was a good job... I worked hard there [at the metal fabrication company], I got good contacts and earned them good money, lots of money [pauses]... Anyway I had never been out of work like I said, but I had bills and the kids, so I went down the dole office, they said something like "no jobs in sales, how about working in a warehouse for minimum wage, how does that sound?". Pretty shit, really.

Me: If there were no jobs at the time, there probably wasn't much they could do for you was there?

Harry: I didn't expect them to magic me a job up out of thin air, I am a realist, but I did expect something more than that. Just for them to look at me down their noses and say "piss off, go stack shelves. There you go mate, that's you dealt with! Next! [shouts 'Next' loudly, then shrugs his shoulders]. I was earning forty five grand a year, how much tax did I pay from that hey? All those years paying tax, they gave me fuck all because they had spent my tax on all the people who come over from other countries or on the ones that never fucking work. I shouldn't swear but it annoys me, welfare should be given to people who have paid in, I had paid in and what do I get, 'ey? I get shelf stacking [bangs the table]... (Harry, Interview 1)

Eventually Harry re-trained as a bus driver - a job that he does not particularly enjoy - that he had to retrain was obviously not the specific demand that we can identify here. Instead, it was the way in which he was treated when he was unemployed that presents a specific demand. Again, we can identify an initial request, this was, in Harry's words the fact that:

I needed help, I'd never done this before [been unemployed and needing support] and they gave me nothing, I wanted to work wanted money needed to work. They just wanted me to go away I think... When I was really struggling, I mean it was really bad, proper struggle and I was short of cash and needed money I just couldn't get me head round the paperwork that these bureaucrats wanted. In the end I gave up, they won, I got into debt and saw an advert about the buses, I don't mind driving so I went for

it. But it still rankles... the government weren't interested, their answer was shelf stacking (Harry, Interview 1).

We see here again that for Harry the government were deemed responsible, for what he perceived to be a lack of support during his twelve month period of unemployment. This is a single demand, which began with a request for support in dealing with his situation and yet was transformed into an unfulfilled demand that left a lasting legacy for Harry, a legacy of dissatisfaction with not just the job centre staff but with the government as a whole who were deemed ultimately responsible for ignoring his initial requests for support.

What is revealed from examining the demands of Ian, Fiona and Harry is that whilst their personal situations are different each has a strongly articulated grievance that stems from a perception that some aspect of the welfare system has failed them and that in each case the government is held responsible for this. The demands can be numerous and complex as in the case of Ian and Fiona or singular and focused as with Harry but all lead to social frustration and a sense of being 'failed by the system' for a protracted temporal period. That services are expected by the narrators and that they hold government responsible when these services are denied seems to be in keeping with quantitative research on the subject. A large scale research conducted by Ipsos MORI on behalf of the RSA found that, for the public, one of the key roles of government is to ensure the 'fairness' of service delivery and that the government is expected to "ensure *quality* of provision" and that government is held responsible for the "guarantee [of] minimum standards of public services for all in society" (2010, p.25).

Other demands that have been categorised as welfare demands did not necessarily directly involve aspects of the welfare state but instead involved local community services and amenities, which nonetheless were expected by narrators. Chris was an administrator in a large office and was also responsible for training new members of staff; he chose to keep his involvement in the EDL hidden from his bosses and colleagues. At twenty six he lived with his partner in what he described as "*a nice flat, posh people would call it an apartment*" which was on the out skirts of a troubled estate. He had lived there for over six years and had, over time, seen the area become even more deprived, or in Chris's more direct words, "*it's like a tip, and gets more like a tip every day*". I never visited Chris's flat or apartment but he described some of the problems he experienced to me:

Chris: Graffiti is scrawled everywhere and the bollards that are supposed to stop the cars driving round the side of my place have been ripped up, literally ripped up, God knows how they did it. So now we get cars driving down the side every night playing music. Some of the lights {street lamp lights} are bost [broken] as well.

Me: Any other problems?

Chris: I know it sounds like nothing to you and I am going off like an old woman about lights and bollards but it's my life, I fucking live there [said defensively, but he laughs at the end as he says "I live there"].

Me: No, no, sorry I didn't mean it like that mate, I just want us to get down as many problems as you've had. It's for accuracy, for my sake.

Chris: Well, it's like, there's, there is this little community centre type thing just next to a play park across the road from us and they have shut the centre down, so its derelict. So now, now because they have just abandoned it the kids get in there and cause chaos. They hang around and shit, set fires, just cause grief. My nan came round the other day to visit us and there was a load of them hanging round and it was fucking embarrassing mate. There are packs of them causing all kinds of shit (Chris, Interview 1).

In the first instance I thought that for Chris the issues in his local area were perhaps more of a safety concern, however, Chris was always reticent to discuss issues such as fears and personal safety with me. As a well built twenty six year old who worked out at the gym I sensed that he was loathe to admit to having any personal fears. Therefore, even though it is possible that he found his local area unsafe he never told me and I took him at his word and listened to his complaints about the aesthetics of the local area and the 'embarrassment' that he felt living in such close proximity to the abandoned community centre and play park and the damaged street furniture.

What made this issue a demand was that Chris told me that his partner had made contact with the local authority in an attempt to get them to fix the damaged street furniture, the graffiti and had also raised concerns about the abandoned community building. I got the impression that Chris had also made contact with the local authority himself but he never admitted to this, perhaps thinking that it would make him look less masculine or make him appear afraid.

However, the details he went into about telephone calls and complaints to the local authority suggested to me that he himself had made some of the calls. What follows is Chris describing the outcome of these numerous complaints; these comments were made during several over several different conversations within our first interview but for clarity have been condensed below into one segment:

Yeah at first they [the council] came and fixed stuff. We weren't the only people calling them when we first moved in, it wasn't just us making a fuss...They came and fixed stuff and then the light or bollard would get smashed again. Eventually I think they just thought 'fuck it, it's a waste of time or money', so they came less often. The bollards were ruined for a year at first before they came and sorted it...The community park thing was abandoned in 2009... I think they just didn't do anything with it...it's like they had given up on the area, they didn't give a toss and they still don't (Chris, Interview 1).

Whilst street lighting, bollards and an abandoned community building may not, on the face of it, appear to be critical or life changing issues when taken together it was clear that they had a significant impact upon Chris's life. More importantly, for our understanding of populism, it made Chris resentful of the authorities that he held responsible for taking action and who he thus blamed for their lack of action. We can draw two key points from the four narrators who expressed primary welfare demands, whether these were multiple or singular; firstly, they had on-going concerns that became unfulfilled demands and secondly, they blamed the authorities for not fulfilling these demands and thus for their social frustration. This social frustration was linked to a sense of being trapped in a situation that was perceived as being not their fault and not in their power to correct, such a situation can lead to a feeling of powerlessness because, as Jensen notes, individuals in such situations often lack "capacity to withdraw and disconnect" (2013, p.441); they are thus trapped in a situation which they feel should have been solved by the dominant authority.

Safety Demands

All of the narrators in this study (except for Garry) lived in cities and urban areas and the English Defence League is, at its core, a movement that physically operates within and concerns itself with the urban landscape (Rogaly and Qureshi, 2013, p. 426). It is therefore not surprising that the urban, city dwelling

narrators within this study had uniquely urban safety demands. Safety concerns can be seen as being either immediate and localised or more remote but existential, in both cases there can be requests to government that morph into unfulfilled demands. However, safety demands are less likely to involve face to face contact with government agents and agencies (unlike welfare demands) but rather a generalised perception that not enough is being done over a prolonged temporal period. A lack of direct contact with government agencies does not negate a request becoming a demand, as the criteria set out above demonstrates. It is sufficient for the authority that is held accountable for dealing with safety issues to be perceived as not fulfilling its role for a claim to become an unfulfilled demand.

Whilst the welfare demands were most vociferously expressed by the three narrators who were or had been most dependent on state support (Ian, Fiona and Harry) the safety demands were evenly spread across the narrators with four narrators expressing prominent demands (Adam, David, Eve, Garry) regarding both immediate/localised and remote/existential concerns, which they felt the authorities had failed to address. Busher has found that amongst the many competing concerns held by EDL members who he had spoken to, issues such as “overpopulation...crime and (in)justice, [and] paedophilia” (2016, Loc.5161) were mentioned. By historicising the concerns of my narrators I was able to examine when and how such safety concerns developed and the effect that it had on the narrator’s perceptions of government and thus their susceptibility to engaging in a populist movement.

Adam acted as my facilitator during this research and had helped me conduct an earlier study of the EDL in 2010. Consequently I had the easiest rapport with Adam and even though he was, like Chris, not the type of person to easily admit to fears and security concerns he was willing to open up about some of his fears since leaving the army. For Adam, “everything changed after 9/11, it was war. We are at war...I’ve fought in the war [as a British Army soldier] in Afghan but it’s a war here in England as well”. As a soldier Adam was specifically unhappy with the way that soldier’s kit concerns had been ignored during combat missions, therefore he had already formed a poor opinion of the government. However, he also articulated very strong existential safety demands. These related to a belief that this country and its citizens face a risk to their actual existence and a concomitant belief that the government who is responsible for the protection of the country and its citizens has failed in its role.

As a full time soldier for five years Adam had a very ‘black and white’ view of British security post 9/11. He blamed the British government for the London terror attacks of 2005; he told me that:

After what we saw in Afghan [his deployment to Afghanistan] we all knew that the Muslim terrorists would bring the fight to us, all of us we knew it, we knew they would try and kill our civilians. The government had the resources but failed to act, that blood, that blood was on their hands. They had been told that shit was going to happen, but they were too easy on the radical Islamists in our country. Too soft yeah (Adam, Interview 2)

Whilst the welfare demands were often couched in an anti immigrant rhetoric, the existential safety demands were all focused directly on ‘Muslims’ and ‘Islam’ and often referenced the ‘War on Terror’. Whilst they were clearly demands being made of government they also clearly and unambiguously identified the threat as being from ‘Muslims’ and often the language suggested that the narrators did not distinguish between Radical Islamist terrorists and non radical law abiding innocent British citizens who happened to be Muslim. For example, Adam was concerned that:

By being too soft on all of them [Muslims] the government has made us as a country look so fucking weak. They don’t fear us and they should. They are trying to kill us. In World War Two right, Churchill didn’t stand up and say things like, “oh it’s not all Germans fault, it’s just a few in the SS or whatever, so you had better be nice to most Germans”. He didn’t say that did he? No, no he said “kill the bastards, keep killing them”. So why has our government failed to protect our citizens? Why? Because they are weak and they are fucking cowards (Adam, Interview 3)

Adam’s request for the government to protect British citizens by ‘getting tough’ had been frustrated over many years and attacks such as 7/7 and the inflammatory speeches of radical hate preachers such as Anjem Choudary had served to reinforced his perception that the government was failing in its duty to protect the country. David also had a similar existential safety demand that had festered for over a decade since the ‘War on Terror’ but which also could be traced back to the IRA conflict. What both David and Adam’s demands had in common is their remoteness, even more so in David’s case. At forty two David was the oldest of all the narrators and had never directly experienced any terror attack, indeed he once told me “I’ve had a pretty decent life, I have been lucky

to be fair”. As the owner of his own car repair centre who was married with three children David did not appear to have experienced the hardship that the narrators with welfare demands had, neither had he experienced warfare like Adam and yet he had a raw and almost constant anger at the government for, in his words, *“Betraying the country”*.

David certainly saw the threat as existential and the government was, as far as he was concerned, failing in its duty to protect both *“my children’s future...[and] the country that I love”* and this failure had been occurring for *“years and years, decades”*. And yet the threat was also remote, I asked David:

Me: Do you personally fear terrorism or war? I mean, will it ever affect you? Or is it more the thought of it and the thought of government not acting?

David: I don’t fear myself, you know, I aint scared for myself. I will be okay but I fear for my kids. They will be living in a country that cannot protect itself, we haven’t protected ourself since the left wing media made all that stupid fuss about Bloody Sunday. Since then all governments have been scared, scared of IRA and now scared of the Muslims. So I’m not scared for me but this lack of action, not being willing to act has meant we are under attack you see (David, Interview 1).

What is obvious from listening to David is that this fear is both existential and remote and yet no less greatly held because of its remoteness. Consequently he sees the government as failing in its duty to adequately protect against this most serious and existential of threats. It should here be noted that for at least ten years David had chosen to get most of his news from right wing American internet and T.V. sites which, according to Altheide, are engaged in a systematic “politics of fear” which “promotes extensive social control efforts that reflect audience fears and resonate with collective identity about the legitimacy of protecting ‘us’ against ‘them’” (2006, p.37). The resulting effect is that the audience seeks out and supports political leaders who validate such fears. Consuming a steady diet of U.S. media discourse relating to the U.S. political and social context was sure to leave David dissatisfied with the U.K. government whose rhetoric was often somewhat softer to that of the U.S. government. David confirmed this point by often comparing the “*weak*” British government with the “*no nonsense*” and “*go and bloody kill them attitude*” of the American government.

Whilst safety demands that related to the remote and existential threat of terrorism were expressed by Adam and David, we can also identify specific demands that related to immediate and localised safety issues. The most memorable of these demands was articulated by Eve, who at twenty two, was the youngest narrator in this study. When I met Eve she was training to be a dental nurse whilst living with her parent's in a relatively affluent suburb. She had been most reluctant to speak to me, even after Adam, who had been friends with her former boyfriend, had assured her that I was 'okay' and after I had met her during many demonstrations. Indeed, I had on several occasions removed her name from my list of potential narrators after yet another refusal from her to take part in the study only to add her name back to the list. I was willing to persevere because of her behaviour during demonstrations; unlike any of the other EDL members I encountered on demo days Eve seemed most reserved, she never joined in with the singing, never shouted out, never waved flags or clapped and looked on intently but passively.

I had heard from Adam and others that Eve's brother had been badly beaten several years before by an Asian gang and this was obviously something that I wanted to discuss with Eve once she had finally agreed to take part in this study. However, after over an hour of talking during our first interview Eve said nothing about her brother and she seemed reluctant to commit to a second interview. Nonetheless, it was clear that Eve had a great antipathy towards the police in particular and the government in general, accusing the police of:

Being racist against whites...the politicians have made them into a politically correct band of bullies... I blame them both [politicians and police] for not protecting normal people like us. They [the politicians] don't give a fuck about normal people and all the police care about is looking after Asians and foreigners, they just they don't care about us
(Eve, Interview 1)

I eventually learned more details about Eve's brother when we were in a pub at the beginning of an EDL demo in Birmingham, Eve was there with two friends and I was with Adam and several others. We eventually moved outside the pub for a cigarette, it was still quiet as we were some of the earliest people to arrive. Adam, who knew Eve's brother asked after him and I took my chance to enquire about the rumours I had heard regarding her brothers run in with an Asian gang. Eve explained to me that in 2009 her brother had been involved in a fight with a gang, she told me that "*People always talk about paki bashing but*

this was a gang of them who attacked my brother for being white and the police didn't care about it at all" (Field Diary, Birmingham, 20/07/2013)

Having been told this story I was able to look upon Eve's comments in our earlier interview in new light. Her general anger towards the police and her belief that the politicians had caused the police to stop "*protecting normal people like us*" now held a new resonance. When Eve had made that statement I believed her reference to 'us' meant the EDL, however, I now suspect that the 'us' actually referred to her and her family. Eve clearly felt that the police had failed to protect her brother and that this was part of a wider problem in society in which 'political correctness' was threatening the safety of her brother and other "*normal people*". This therefore constituted a specific demand against the dominant authority, not just the police but also '*politicians*' who were deemed responsible for politicising the police. Eve felt that her family's complaints against both the police and those who were responsible for assaulting her brother had been ignored and thus this specific grievance had developed into a general mistrust in and dislike for the police specifically and for government in general.

Identity Demands

During the narrative interviews issues of identity arose often, narrators spoke of their EDL identities, their English identities and what these meant to them as individuals. A theme that also arose was that of individuals' identities being seen as under threat and linked to this a more general sense that national or local community identity was being eroded. These identity concerns ranged from the general comments such as Adam complaining that "*to be English is to be a threatened species you know, everyone gets to be Scottish, Welsh, Indian, Muslim whatever but tell em that you're English and proud and you get called racist*" (Adam, Interview 1) to much more specific issues that can be identified as specific popular demands.

Bill was the most unlikely EDL member of all the narrators. His father was from India and had settled in the U.K. in the late 1950s as a child when his family moved here. Bill had worked for the ambulance service in administration once he left school but had soon left to become a self employed plumber. Bill, twenty nine years old, would regularly attend demonstrations with Adam and was seen as one of the 'old hands' of the local group, having joined the EDL in its very early phases. Bill had a very strong sense of his 'English' identity and

was quite defensive if anyone ever referred to him as ‘Indian’ or ‘Asian’. Adam once said, only half joking, that “*Bill will kick your bollocks in if you call him Indian*”. Unlike the other narrators Bill did not articulate any welfare or safety demands, he earned sufficient money, had his own home and appeared to have a supportive network of family and friends. Yet he had a firmly established anger towards what he saw as the government’s wilful erosion of national identity which was displayed most forcefully through his anger at what he termed “*failed multiculturalism*”.

Bill always unapologetically referred to himself as English, never British, and he would regularly use pejorative racial terms and had previously voted BNP because he said that “*someone needs to stick up for us and keep the Poles and Pakis out*”. However, he had become disenchanted with the BNP due to their policy of only letting Caucasians become members (a policy that the BNP changed in 2010 after a law court ruling found that the ‘whites only’ policy was discriminatory). During demonstrations Bill would often loudly and proudly proclaim “*I may have dark skin and a Sikh dad but I am English through and through*” and in his discussions with me he appeared frank and at ease whilst discussing the “*death of England*”:

Bill: The problem is yeah, is that despite everybody has said that they don't want more immigration the government has just ignored us. Completely fucking ignored us, read the letters section in my local [local newspaper] and there are loads of people writing in saying “please no, no more immigrants, we are full, we have had enough” and they [the government] just fucking ignore it yeah.

Me: I suppose we need people to come and work here, immigrants do a lot of work here...

Bill [interrupting me] Yeah yes but, but at what cost. I am saying you see, I am telling you that you walk down some streets in England now and you wouldn't know you was in England. People don't speak English, people don't act English. My old man yeah, he and my ganja [granddad] they came here from India, they assimilated. They English, that's why I am English.

Me: I'm sure they were proud of their culture and proud to be here at the same time, I mean you can be both can't you?

Bill: Well they cooked curries [laughing] my ganja loved his curries. The neighbours used to complain me dad says, stunk the place. They got called Pakis and that but they stuck here, they worked they didn't fucking hide away, not scrounging and fucking plotting... [pauses] This new lot, they are taking England away, too many of them you must see that (Bill, Interview 1)

It was apparent that Bill saw his family as having 'earned' the right to be English or British. Bill always used the term 'English', and he saw current immigration as eroding that identity that his family had worked so hard to achieve. I always felt that Bill's aggressive proclamations of his Englishness were perhaps a sign of some deeper insecurity, a fear that he, by the colour of his skin, would be denied his claim to Englishness. His anger at the government, which he expressed early on during our first interview hinted at this insecurity. What follows are excerpts from several conversations held during that first thirty minutes of discussion:

I bloody despise them [the government] yeah, because they just keep letting them [immigrants] flood in, it pisses people off 'cus they don't want more fucking immigrants... So people see me and they think I have just got off the fucking boat, no, I haven't I AM [said with force] English, I got the passport and everything.... There are so many Pakis and other riff raff here that people just see a brown face and think "fucking skiver", it shouldn't matter about your skin colour, I'm English... But the government have run this failed multi cultural project and it's wiping out England and making everybody seem bad (Bill, Interview 1).

In addition to highlighting a specific demand against the government – a reduction of immigration – it also hints at Bill's concern that his English identity will be eroded, even denied, because he is at risk of being associated with these new immigrants who 'don't belong' and are not worthy of the same claim to the 'English identity' that Bill believes he is entitled to.

This concern surrounding the 'threat' to national and local identity was also strongly expressed by David and Garry, who both articulated specific identity demands. Garry was the only narrator who did not live in a city or urban conurbation, instead living in a village several miles from the city. He described his village as "*nice really, pretty old fashioned...but it's got everything we need, it's got shops and pub and a church that no one ever goes to... it's better than*

the city, it's not full of scum" (Garry, Interview 1). At thirty two he was one of the older narrators and probably the most economically well off, owning his own building company. His work often took him to sites within cities and brought him into contact with a large immigrant workforce that provides labouring and building services to large urban building developments. It was somewhat paradoxical that the narrator who lived in a village with an overwhelming white British population should feel so acutely that his national identity was being threatened. He prided himself on employing only white British people within his building 'gangs' because:

You go on so many sites these days and the people on there, foreign workers you see, they can't speak the lingo, they can't understand what the site manager and contracts chap is telling them. It's bloody dangerous see, if they don't know what's going on (Garry, Interview 1).

Whilst on the face of it Garry's objections appeared to be language and safety based, he soon moved on to what I suspected was a more fundamental cause of his concern:

No joke, not joking, We've been on some sites and we are the only English people on there apart from gaffers. No joke, seventy odd people on site and twelve of us are English. You feel alienated, it wasn't just me saying it. All the lads right, they were saying to me 'we just don't feel right on here Garry'. And tensions built and people were getting arsey and I just thought to myself 'this aint right', 'this aint England'...Outside the site was no better, like fucking down town Mogadishu...I'm glad I live out of it (Garry, Interview 1).

Garry had felt that this situation had been going on for "too long...At least twenty years" and felt that the government was responsible for "...selling our young 'uns out. They [the government] are destroying them, they keep allowing foreigners in to undercut us and the building trade is hard enough" (Garry, Interview 1). He felt angered that our British youngsters were unemployed whilst the building trade had an over-reliance upon immigrant labour and in a rather simplistic equation he felt that "[our] own youngsters [are] on the dole with no money and the government just wants to bring in more immigrants. Absolutely shameful, it's shameful that they sell out our kids like this" (Garry, Interview 1).

David had similar fears, but expressed them in a much more messianic manner and told me that the government was “*deliberately trying to destroy white working class culture and letting immigrants in... [who] breed quicker than us and so by 2050ish whites will be in the minority*” (David, Interview 1). Whilst Bill, Garry and David had these fears of a threatened identity and were hostile towards immigrants they saved much of their vitriol for the government who was seen as responsible for controlling immigration and who they believed were ignoring the public either through a mistaken pursuance of political correctness and multiculturalism (Bill) or through deliberate policies aimed at marginalising whites (David and Garry). For all three, and for Adam and Ian who had similar identity concerns, the problem was seen as having been going on for many years, even decades. Whilst issues of identity are, by their nature, more complex than welfare and safety issues we can still highlight specific demands here. The demands relate to immigration control but also, and especially in the cases of David and Gary, a demand that the English identity should be more actively protected by government. The results of these demands being temporally unfulfilled led to very high levels of social frustration and feelings of powerlessness and belligerence which were expressed just as forcefully as welfare and safety demands.

Conclusion

We have examined some of the key demands that were identified during the interviews with the nine narrators and have examined these demands with reference to the identities and concerns of the narrators. The list of demands is clearly not designed to be exhaustive, many other demands by many other subjects will have been key to fermenting the populist emergence of the EDL; however what the demands that have been analysed above do demonstrate is that there existed a number of different subject positions that needed to be accounted for in order to understand why the EDL discourse gained traction.

By describing and exploring the words of the nine narrators who were involved in this research we can identify a number of demands being articulated by a number of different competing subject positions; for example we have an employer, a mother, a welfare recipient, a sister and a military veteran. Each subject position leads to a different demand and whilst we can ‘group’ demands together they remain altogether unique. What united them was the fact that all demands had been perceived as unfulfilled and consequently a situation of social frustration existed and the dominant authorities - the ‘government’, the

‘politicians’, the ‘police’ and the ‘local council’ are held responsible. We can therefore appreciate the complexity and contingency of the emergence of the English Defence League. This was not an inevitable outcome of fixed pre-existing class based politics, each narrator occupied a different subject position and each subject position was also ultimately contingent and “politically negotiable” (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, p.131) and could, therefore, lead to many possible demands. It was through the populist discourse of the EDL that operated through the logic of equivalence that these differing demands were incorporated into a single collective identity and drawn into an antagonistic relationship with those held responsible for these competing demands – a process that will be investigated in the next chapter.

Whilst the unfulfilled demands that have been presented here are a precondition for the emergence of the English Defence League as a populist movement it must be acknowledged that they existed prior to and independent of the English Defence League; such demands made identification with the EDL possible and the EDL could not have emerged as a national populist movement of protest without the social frustration that existed due to these unfulfilled demands. However, the emergence of and identification with the EDL protest discourse was not inevitable, another movement with an altogether different discourse could have emerged and united these disparate unfulfilled demands. Therefore, the dislocatory event discussed in the first part of this chapter is a fundamental pre-condition of the EDL emergence – it acted as the spark – and was the logical and localised beginning for a national populist movement. Furthermore, the Luton event set the tone of the EDL discourse that united the disparate unfulfilled demands.

As has already been noted above, a dislocation occurs when a given discourse can no longer provide coherent meaning; it is thus the instant when a discourse reaches its explanatory limit. Because of this a dislocation “is a traumatic experience that disarranges the structure” (Mendonca, 2014, p.73) but it also permits new understandings and identities to emerge. As we have comprehensively identified above, the nine narrators in this study all had unfulfilled demands that made them not just ripe for the emergence of a populist movement but also made them actual components of the populist emergence. The events in Luton can be understood as a ‘crisis’ event that dislocated pre-existing discourses and served to empower new discourses that highlighted the failure of the authorities - a failure to protect ‘our’ troops but also a deeper

failure that allowed the extremists onto the street in the first place. This understanding of the ‘failure’ of the authorities is something that would clearly resonate with subjects who are already socially frustrated because of a perceived failure of those in power to address their demands.

The Luton event also built upon pre-existing fears and prejudices regarding Muslims who were an easily identifiable ‘other’ group who would become inextricably linked with anti-government discourses. As we have seen through an examination of our narrators’ demands ‘others’, namely immigrants, already played a part within articulations of unfulfilled demands against the system, whether in conjunction with welfare demands, security demands or identity demands. The Luton event allowed the Muslim ‘other’ to be clearly linked in with the perceived failures of government. In effect it served to highlight and exaggerate a threatening enemy whilst confirming the perceived impotence of government. This chapter has examined the two key elements that provided the conditions that were necessary for the emergence of the EDL and which existed logically prior to the formation of the EDL discourse and the social antagonism that it constructed. In the next chapter we will go on to examine how through a process of social antagonism and the logic of equivalence the EDL unified competing and particular popular demands into a universalised struggle.

Chapter Five – The EDL’s Populist Discourse – Equivalence and Antagonism

Equivalences are only such in terms of a lack pervading them all, and this requires the identification of the source of social negativity. Equivalential popular discourses divide, in this way, the social into two camps; power and the underdog...a discourse will be more or less populist depending on the degree to which its contents are articulated by equivalential logics (Laclau in Panizza, 2005, pp.38-47).

The identification of “the people” and “the other” are political constructs that have been symbolically established through the relation of antagonism, a mode of identification in which the relation between its form and its content is given by naming; that is, of establishing who are the enemies of the people, and therefore the people itself (Hamid, 2014, p.87).

Feel your strength! Take confidence in each other. Know that you are not alone. You are part of a great tidal wave of protest and patriotism that will save this country...Who will put their life on the line for this country?...It is the people around me, the people here and now, the ordinary people of this country who have risen up and are continuing to stand up to say enough is enough (Tommy Robinson, EDL Leader in his speech at Newcastle upon Tyne demonstration on 29th May 2010).

Introduction

In the last chapter it was argued that the emergence of the English Defence League was predicated upon both a dislocatory event that challenged existing discourses and acted as an initial spark for the formation of the movement; and also, a complex and wide range of individual demands that made actors distrustful of government and thus ripe for a populist political protest movement. This therefore demonstrated the preconditions for the emergence of a populist movement, however, we do not, as yet, have an understanding of how the EDL mobilised and came to construct its specific identity. In order to examine this EDL identity it is necessary that we examine the EDL’s discourse in detail. This chapter will examine this specific EDL discourse with reference to the logic of equivalence and social antagonism. In doing so this chapter will address this work’s second research aim:

- Examine how the EDL discourse utilised equivalence and antagonism to construct the ‘other’

By drawing upon both primary research including narrative interviews and participant observation and secondary research this chapter will identify the position of the ‘other’ within the EDL’s discourse. Four specific ‘others’ will be examined, these being Muslims, government, Police and Anti-fascist counter demonstrators and the way that these ‘others’ interact within the EDL’s discursive constructions will also be identified. Having examined the ‘other’ in terms of antagonism and equivalence This chapter will also examine the role that demonstrations played in strengthening the EDL identity; it will be argued that because of the physical antagonism of demo days a process of equivalence operated that allowed the EDL to be inclusive to a range of different groups. Thus demonstration days were not only significant as collective action and highlighting the EDL’s message, they also acted to further enhance the populism of the EDL by providing a highly antagonistic setting in which the EDL struggled against those it had constructed as ‘others’. By utilising the concepts of equivalence and antagonism this chapter will demonstrate how the EDL simplified the social-scape through a highly populist discourse that united ‘us’ against ‘them’

5.1.1 Identifying the ‘Other’ in the EDL Discourse

It has already been demonstrated, through the words of the narrators, how different specific demands which were perceived to have been unfulfilled existed amongst EDL members. Rather than having a single unified a priori complaint the narrators in this study had many different and particular demands. What they initially had in common was that these demands had gone unfulfilled. However, through the EDL’s populist discourse which operated via the logic of equivalence the particularism was minimised and a universal struggle of the ‘people’ against the government and radical Islam was constructed. This is how populist movements seek to construct the people as an identity standing against the ‘others’. Laclau made this clear when he discussed Peronism in Argentina during the 1960s and 1970s. He argued that:

People felt that through the differential particularity of their demands – housing, union rights, level of wages, protection of national industry, etc. – something equally present in all of them was expressed, which was the opposition to the regime. It is important to realize that this dimension of

universality was not at odds with the particularism of the demands – or even of the groups entering into the equivalential relation – but grew out of it. A certain more universal perspective, which developed out of the inscription of particular demands in a wider popular language of resistance, was the result of the expansion of the equivalential logic (2007, p.54).

We have so far addressed the demands of our narrators and shown how they shared a common theme of hostility in and lack of trust towards the government. On one level this is the equivalence between them – that all demands have gone unfulfilled, however, as Laclau makes clear above there is also “a wider popular language of resistance” that comes into effect and it is that language that constructs the identity of the populist movement as representing ‘the people’ in opposition to a dangerous ‘other’. In the case of the EDL it was this language which operated a logic of equivalence to bring together various differing subjects and subject positions all of whom had some complaint against the institutional system and power. It was also through the EDL’s discourse that the Muslim ‘other’ was incorporated into this logic of equivalence, which intricately linked Muslims with government and simplified these identities just as it simplified the differences between those constructed by the EDL as ‘the people’. In essence this means that a populist discourse that applies the logic of equivalence “works by establishing a discursive unity between disparate elements by positing the existence of a common threat” (Clohesy in Howarth and Torfing, 2005, p.183).

In order to understand and analyse just how populist the EDL identity is it is necessary to identify the ‘others’ who are seen as a threat. The process of creating a populist discourse that seeks to represent ‘the people’ as a universal group in opposition to the ‘other’ is based upon social antagonism. In essence, the process makes the ‘other’ external to the identity of ‘the people’. We have already demonstrated that for the narrators who took part in this study there were intense anti-government feelings due to a range of unfulfilled demands. However, it was not only the government and local authorities who were targeted by the EDL discourse; we have already examined the emergence of the EDL in Luton in 2009 in reaction to the treatment of British soldiers by a small group of radical Islamists and articulated how that event positioned Muslims, the police and government as a threatening ‘other’ during the nascent stages of the EDL.

As the EDL's populist discourse emerged these three groups along with the anti-fascist demonstrators who challenged the EDL at demonstrations were all portrayed, to a greater or lesser extent as dangerous 'others' and were, increasingly, made equivalent. By constructing dangerous 'others' the EDL were able to create a populist identity that divided the social-scape into 'us' and 'them'. This section draws on primary data gathered from the narrative interviews, demonstrations and meetings that I attended and also on second hand data from the former EDL website and from social media. What it seeks to demonstrate is that even though both academics (see for example, Alessio and Meredith, 2014) and the EDL themselves (see Busher, 2016, Loc.3123) may see the EDL as a single issue movement, focused upon opposing radical Islam; it actually presented several hostile 'others' within its discourse.

Throughout the EDL's discourse there is an attempt to construct the 'others' as anti-democratic, and thus to identify the EDL with 'democracy'; Bartlett and Littler have argued that "it is hard to know accurately when this language is being used as a cover for more sinister or intolerant views, and when it is genuine" (2011, p.8). In actuality, we should not see this language as either sinister and intolerant or genuine; instead the EDL's discourse seeks to do what any populist discourse seeks to do and that is to construct an antagonistic boundary between the dangerous 'others' and the 'people' who are universalised. This antagonistic boundary allows for an identification of the 'people' in opposition to a threatening outside that is excluded from sharing in the identity of the people.

5.1.2 Muslims

It is the EDL's anti-Muslim message that has garnered the most attention both within the mainstream media and within academia. Whilst the initial emergence of the English Defence League was in direct response to 'Muslim extremists' (EDL Mission Statement) who abused soldiers; and whilst it is possible, however unlikely, that those individuals who were initially responsible for the organisation and development of the movement were honest in their claims of only wishing to focus on such 'Muslim extremists', it is now self evident that the EDL quickly became and has ever since remained an openly and aggressive Islamophobic movement that presents 'Muslims' in general as a threat.

Islamophobia is here understood as a discursive construction that:

sustains and perpetuates negatively evaluated meaning about Muslims and Islam in the contemporary setting... influencing and impacting upon social action, interaction, response and so on, shaping and determining understanding, perceptions and attitudes...that inform and construct thinking about Muslims and Islam as Other (Allen, 2010, p.190).

It is clear from my own research and the research of others (see for example Allen, 2011 and Kassimeris and Jackson, 2015) that the EDL has constructed an Islamophobic discourse where Muslims are seen as a homogenous and dangerous ‘other’. It should be acknowledged that there is somewhat of a disconnect between the often quite sophisticated anti-Islam discourse constructed by the EDL as a populist movement and the way in which this discourse is subsequently violently and crudely re-expressed by individuals at public demonstrations. Indeed, some of the narrators who were involved in this study presented two constructions of Islam and Muslims; whilst both were hostile the violence and crudity of the message was amplified many times over during demonstrations whilst it was presented in a more ‘reasoned’ manner during interviews. For example, when I attended a demonstration with Adam he was vocally expressing his hatred of Muslims and Islam in song form whilst during one conversation he admitted that *“there may be some decent ones, I bet there are good Muslims but we don’t hear enough from them, you know. I don’t like them but there are probably some alright ones”* (Adam, Interview 2).

Chants such as “Allah, Allah, who the fuck is Allah”; “Allah is a peado”; “Let’s all burn a Burka” (sung to the tune of ‘Let’s all have a disco’) and even “shoot the Muzzie scum” were heard by myself at demonstrations I attended and similar behaviour can be seen on numerous videos uploaded to Youtube by EDL supporters. Whilst the EDL may have claimed that this is not part of its official discourse, what will be demonstrated here is that whilst the demo language is more violent and aggressive, this is simply a difference in delivery and not in content. At every level the English Defence League constructs Islam and Muslims as a dangerous threat to ordinary people.

In 2014 Legoland Windsor made news headlines when it emerged that the entire park had been booked out by a Muslim cleric from the Muslim Research and Development Foundation for a ‘Family Fun Day’ for Muslim families, this sparked a protest led by the EDL which spearheaded its campaign against Legoland with an article on its website. This demonstrates both how the EDL discourse fails to distinguish between ‘extreme’ and ‘non-extreme’ Muslims

and also how an EDL attack on Muslims via a populist discourse can become more aggressive as it is taken on by individuals in public. The EDL article entitled “*A Great Day Out for the Whole (Muslim) Family*” was a highly stylised and sarcastic article that told readers that the ‘Halal Legoland Day’ would be great fun:

as long as you are not gay, Jewish, Christian, Hindu, Sikh, a Buddhist, Ahmadi, atheist, don't wear Western clothing, do not talk to strange men (if female) and are prepared to prostrate yourself in public before Allah at the prescribed times. Full body covering required at all times; Hijab recommended; Niqab or Burqa optional (EDL Website, 14th February, 2014).

We can see from the above extract how the populist discourse works, dividing Muslims who are seen as both threatening (the picture that accompanied the article showed a Lego figure wearing desert camouflage and carrying a Rocket Propelled Grenade Launcher and AK47 Assault Rifle) and exclusionary and separating Muslims from many other possible identities – ‘gay’ or ‘Jewish’ or ‘Christian’ etc. It also seeks to highlight the ‘alien’ elements of Islam in contrast to the democratic freedom of the West, for example by highlighting restrictive dress and with the very heavily image laden description of ‘prostrating’ oneself in public and also highlighting restrictions on female behaviour. The article ends with a satirical imagined advertisement for Legoland, just in case there was any ambiguity about just how the EDL view the Muslims who will be attending the Legoland event:

LEGOLAND® Windsor Resort where we're so keen to get your cash we'll even welcome racists, religious bigots and women beaters (EDL website, 14th February 2014).

This last part is important because it demonstrates how the EDL utilised the word racist. Here it is Muslims who are being branded racists and it feeds on the earlier extract that shows how the EDL portrayed Muslims as exclusionary towards other groups; this is important because throughout its discourse the EDL was always at pains to point out that it was not racist. Its official slogan ‘*Not racist, Not Violent, No Longer Silent*’ was in keeping with the group’s construction of itself as being non-racist, indeed, this is because it re-appropriated the term racist and used it to describe Muslim behaviour – therefore the EDL saw itself as inclusive rather than exclusive. This use of

racism as a descriptor of Muslims was something that four of the narrators in this study strongly emphasised. For example Eve told me that:

They shout racist at us, but we aint racist. It's only since I joined [the EDL] that I have really thought about it, we can't be racist to Muslims 'cus there are all coloured Muslims. They come in all colours. You get white Muslims... But they am racist, they hate us because we are white, they hate everything about us, that's racism to me, they're the bloody racists (Eve, Interview 1).

We thus see how by denying racism the EDL also accuse Muslims and Islam of being racist. It should be noted that the Muslim cleric, Haitham al Haddad, who had organised the Legoland 'Halal fun day' does have a history of homophobic comments (see for example the Independent.co.uk news article from Monday 23 February 2015). However, as can be seen from the EDL article above, this was a case of the EDL targeting all Muslims; this is exactly how a highly populist discourse will operate, with the logic of equivalence reducing the differences between 'extreme' and non extreme Muslims. The event was eventually cancelled after the EDL threatened to hold a demonstration outside Legoland and the police raised concerns regarding safety and public order. Whilst the EDL as an organisation was not directly responsible for these threats their campaign, which sought to brand all Muslims as racist bigots, can certainly be seen as encouraging the actions of some individuals who went beyond mere complaint and instead committed or threatened to commit potentially criminal acts.

This 'othering' of Muslims was not only achieved by highlighting their difference in terms of their supposed bigotry and racism, the EDL also encouraged supporters to share their own concerns about 'Muslim Extremists'. In a campaign ran during January 2012, the EDL asked supporters to share their concerns regarding Muslim 'extremists' in their own areas and it was suggested that if the concerns were deemed serious enough then the EDL would take action; supporters were invited to submit their concerns, with the EDL stating that:

If you live in an area which has issues and problems with Muslim extremism, then, please either email your concerns to [redacted] or contact your area regional officer. If you could include the problem details, newspaper reports, local eyewitness

statements and any application will be looked at and decided upon. This gives you an opportunity to integrate your issues to the EDL national agenda (EDL Website, 12th January 2012).

This may appear to be a novel strategy; however, it was in keeping with the wider EDL populist discourse. Firstly, it gave further credence to the discourse that constructed Muslims as an enemy ‘within’ who needed careful monitoring by dedicated EDL activists and supporters. Secondly, it implicitly suggested that the EDL is the organisation that ordinary people could and should rely upon to confront ‘extremism’ rather than the government or police who were seen as unable or unwilling to tackle the problem of Muslim ‘extremism’. Thirdly, it further enhances the EDL’s self image as a democratic grassroots movement, where the ordinary people are given the opportunity to ‘integrate’ their issues and concerns and direct EDL activity. I asked all the narrators about this campaign, whilst six had either not heard of this campaign or could not recall it they all thought it was a good idea when I informed them about it. Of the three narrators who had heard of it Fiona said that she had sent several emails in response. She explained that:

I thought it was good, we were a people power movement and it was good for them to ask us... I reported several things to them, just stuff about how the people at the Mosque were handing out anti-American propaganda, they always did it. To me that stuff was extreme because if I handed out anti-Muslim stuff I would probably get arrested... So yeah, yeah I told them about stuff...I told my friends and family about it, they agreed with me [that the campaign was a good idea] (Fiona, Interview 2).

Exactly what constituted ‘extreme’ behaviour was something that all of the narrators struggled to define; this is because it is never made clear within the EDL discourse exactly what an ‘extremist’ is, and, as a result of this ‘extremist’ Muslims seems to stand in as a descriptor for all Muslims. Indeed, it was only Chris, Fiona and David who seemed to make a distinction between ‘extreme’ and non-extreme. For example, Chris told me:

you might laugh, but for me it’s partly down to how they dress, I think full Burquas or whatever is extreme, I just do. Those who embrace the West, live like they should in our country then that’s fine but the others, I think they are extreme (Chris, Interview 1).

We can see here a sense of fundamental ambiguity; for Chris those Muslims who are ‘like us’ are not ‘extreme’ yet when they dress and act as ‘Muslims’ then they become extreme. Fiona made a similar remark to me, explaining that *“the ones who preach are extreme...but actually I think anyone who listens to the preachers they are also extreme...Mosques are hotbeds of extremism”* (Fiona, Interview 2). It should here be noted that the EDL discourse originated in response to the dislocatory event in Luton which ‘framed’ Muslims as extreme from the outset and this label seems to have become a descriptor for all Muslims. Very often an event would occur in which some ‘extreme’ Muslims were involved but because of the logic of equivalence that operates within such a populist discourse the differences between different Muslim positions were obliterated. This sweeping statement made by the EDL in response to a handful of hard line Islamic clerics is an example:

For Muslims, any criticism of Islam or of Muhammad is grounds for silencing someone. Yet they seem quite free to criticise our way of life, democracy and religious institutions. In the former situation it causes them much offence and loss of dignity and yet in the latter case we are expected to take the criticism without being offended or if we are, we must take it on the chin (EDL website, 23rd January 2014).

We see here how all Muslims are made equivalent and their behaviour is compared to a ‘we’ that essentially refers to anyone who is not identified as a Muslim. By such equivalence the EDL draws attention to the Muslim ‘other’ and through an identification of the Muslim also identifies the ‘we’ – non Muslims. I found that whilst some narrators expressed experiencing problems and antagonism towards Muslims before they joined the EDL (for example Adam, Ian and Eve), when we examined their individual unfulfilled demands, some of the primary individual demands had nothing to do with Muslims or Islam yet all of the narrators supported and ‘bought into’ the EDL’s discourse of the Muslim ‘other’. For Chris it was the EDL that highlighted the problem, he told me that *“I knew this country was going downhill quick but it was being EDL and talking to the lads on demos and online that showed me just how bad they [Muslims] have been on this country”* (Chris, Interview 1). Harry, who was perhaps the most mildly spoken of the nine narrators, also appeared to have been much more concerned about Muslims since joining the EDL:

I knew about terrorism and I knew what was going on in the, in Iraq and shit like that. I knew about 9/11, so I knew but I didn’t properly know, if, if

that makes sense [laughs]. I knew about these things from the papers but I didn't know how bad the problem was... So yeah, I suppose since I joined [the EDL] I am more suspicious of Muslims, I always was, but I know more about them now from listening to people and reading stuff... You listen to people, listen to the stories and you get angry... (Harry, Interview 1).

Whilst Chris and Harry appeared to have had their perceptions altered by the EDL discourse other narrators, notably Adam and David, told me that they were already hostile towards Muslims and Islam and therefore it appeared that the EDL discourse simply reinforced their concerns. Adam, a former soldier, told me that *"I knew what it was like, but a lot [of people] didn't and I think joining EDL opened their eyes"* (Adam, Interview 3). The events in Luton provided the EDL with a dangerous other who had mocked and abused British soldiers and this martial image remained throughout the EDL discourse. From 2012 onwards there was an EDL 'Crusaders' division that was made up of bikers who supported the EDL and the word 'crusade' often featured on banners and flags at demonstrations.

For the EDL all Muslims were targets and despite claims to be focusing only on combating 'extremist' Muslims as we have seen in the examples above the discourse actually made all Muslims equivalent. However, it was not simply Muslims that were portrayed as dangerous to ordinary people, whilst Muslims were the most visible target they were positioned within the discourse alongside other constructed enemies who were all linked together. The brutal and public murder of British soldier Fusilier Lee Rigby on 22nd May 2013 by two men who claimed to act in the name of Islam and in defence of Muslims further added credence to the EDL's discourse and led the EDL to publically state that:

His murder at the hands of jihadists right in our midst, rather than on a foreign battlefield, is a horrible reminder that the war with Islam, declared first by Islam, is a stark and present reality. So often our servicemen and women return from far-flung wars only to find that the very jihadists they had fought in distant battles must be fought all over again right here at home(EDL Website, 24th May, 2013).

Once again, as with the above examples, the EDL's discourse was unable to differentiate between the two criminals who had committed the barbarous act and Islam in its entirety. Indeed, the EDL's response of constructing the murder

of Lee Rigby as a part of a war against the whole of Islam, a gross simplification of the social-scape, is sadly very similar to what one of Rigby's killers said. On video shot just minutes after the murder, his hands still dripping with blood, Rigby's killer Michael Adebolajo declared that:

The only reason we have killed this man today is because Muslims are dying daily by British soldiers...It's an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth...we will never stop fighting you until you leave us alone(taken from The Daily Telegraph Online, 23rd May 2013).

Both discourses operate the same simplifying logic of equivalence that constructs an 'us' and 'them' and both attempt to justify this logic based upon the supposed crimes of the 'other' group. For the EDL this justification began in Luton in 2009, Muslims were seen as a threat that could no longer be incorporated into a discourse of 'us', they thus became a purely negative and external identity and the EDL's discourse continued to construct them as a threat that people and society in general needed 'defending' against. Moreover, the EDL presented itself as the only way of defending against such an external enemy because the government was seen as both incapable and complicit in abandoning ordinary people and this was, of course, linked to unfulfilled demands that were the necessary precondition of a populist emergence.

5.1.3 Government

As was noted in the previous chapter the events in Luton which led to the emergence of the EDL and its populist discourse linked government and Muslims together. The government was seen as responsible for the problem or threat of 'extreme' Muslims, who as I have argued above, actually became all 'Muslims'. Of course, government was also seen as being responsible for refusing the demands of the narrators that we have already identified and so, in essence, the government is doubly positioned within the EDL's populist discourse. Firstly, it is positioned as part of the "power and the underdog" (Laclau, in Panizza, 2005, p.38) construction, where government is seen as the 'power' that is refusing the demands of the 'underdog' or people. Secondly, the government is also drawn into an equivalential relationship with Muslims because the government is seen as responsible for allowing, even colluding with Muslim 'extremism'. The EDL mission statement makes clear this link between 'Islam' and the 'government':

The EDL calls upon the Government to repeal legislation that prevents effective freedom of speech, for freedom of speech is essential if the human rights abuses that sometimes manifest themselves around Islam are to be stopped (EDL Mission Statement).

The mission statement is not specific as to exactly what legislation should be repealed and the accusation of a lack of freedom of speech is a doubtful criticism, considering the vitriol that the EDL have been allowed to express against Muslims during its lifetime. However, what the Mission Statement makes clear is that there is a link between government action and the ‘abuses’ of Islam. The Mission Statement later goes on to claim an even more direct link between the government and Islam; under part 3 of the EDL’s mission statement entitled “*PUBLIC EDUCATION: Ensuring That The Public Get A Balanced Picture Of Islam*” it is stated that:

The British political and media establishment have, for a long time, been presenting a very sanitised and therefore inaccurate view of Islam, shaped by the needs of policy-makers rather than the needs of the public. This has acted as a barrier to informed policy-making and made finding the solution to real problems impossible. In pursuing this self-defeating and destructive policy, the Government has effectively been acting as the propaganda arm of the Muslim Brotherhood (EDL Mission Statement).

This goes beyond accusing the government of inaction and now suggests implicit collusion in helping Muslims who are seen as a threat; it also makes a clear distinction, as one would expect a populist movement to do, between the ‘policy makers’ of government and ‘the public’. Thus in this extract we see both the government as ‘power’ that is ignoring ‘the needs of the public’ underdog and also the government positioned as being directly related (made equivalent) to the ‘problem’ of Islam and Muslims and being accused of acting as a ‘propaganda arm’ of the enemy. For the narrators who I spoke to during this research, all of whom had some issue with central and local government policy and/or distrust of the established authority in general, the link that the EDL made between Muslims and the government became a plausible and believable link and offered a way of understanding high profile events that involved the ‘threat’ of extremist Muslims. Already distrustful, if not openly hostile, towards authority and the establishment and feeling threatened by a ‘Muslim’ other, a discourse that made these two ‘others’ equivalent fell on sympathetic ears and

provided a simple logical explanation to the troubles and problems that the EDL highlighted.

Indeed Adam appeared to hate the government more than Muslims:

Adam: I expect Muslims to take advantage of us, that's what they do isn't it? That's what it says in the Koran. It says kill Infidels, that what it says and that's what they want to do.

Me: So what do you do then? If that is what you see Muslims as doing, what can the EDL do about it?

Adam: We need to, we tell the people about it, we spread the message we let them know that this is what's happening and we show this spineless fucking government up. We let everyone know how the government is betraying them. We show them how if someone sticks a pig's head outside a mosque or burns the Koran then the parliament are all in tears about it, they are crying about it and demanding arrests. But they don't shed a tear when Muslims beat up whites or when they set up fucking Sharia no go zones on our streets. Bunch of wankers, they [the government] are traitors (Adam, Interview 3).

Adam was not alone in seeing the actions of the government as equally if not more offensive than Muslims. David explained that after the September 11th 2001 attacks he was supportive of the government and its “aggressive policy in Afghan” but since then and, especially since joining the EDL, he felt that the government had become:

Coward[s], that's the term I would use to be honest, yeah, originally we went after them [the terrorists] but we ignored what was happening in our country. That's their [the government's] big job, protecting our country... They say we [the EDL] are scum and I can't believe it, fucking hate it. They bow down to Muslims and they slate us for having the guts to challenge Islam and the terrorists... They don't care how we feel they just hate us and I fucking hate them (David, Interview 2).

What we can identify here is a populist construction of the people in an antagonistic relationship with the government, as Brading has noted when examining populism in Venezuela, such populist discourses seek to articulate the people as “the underprivileged/underdog radical camp [positioned] against years of government negligence” and thus such a discourse presents “an

antagonized populist” (Brading, 2013, p.53) identity of the people. In a 2012 release on the EDL website (re-published as an article in 2014 with some changes) the government is accused of lying to the people in regards to the benefits of immigration. The piece does not mention Islam or Muslims and is, instead, an attack on the government and political establishment for allowing increased immigration. It argues that:

The great and the good of the Establishment have subjected the British people to a ceaseless and thunderous barrage of propaganda on how the most profound demographic transformation in our island’s history is hugely benefiting UK PLC. Phrases like ‘Immigration helps us win in the global race’ and ‘Our economy would collapse tomorrow without migrants’ now ring in the ears of the beleaguered indigenous population like a particularity irritating case of tinnitus (EDL Website, April 2014).

Here the victims of immigration are clearly constructed as ‘the British people’ and ‘the beleaguered indigenous population’ who are at risk from ‘the establishment’ and the EDL discourse is clearly highlighting the antagonistic boundary. Whilst the EDL would often openly link the government and Muslims together as part of the same ‘threatening’ problem, for example when EDL leader Tommy Robinson told a demo audience in Bradford that “*Islamic terrorism is alive and well in Yorkshire, and we’re not fucking having it...Our Government is doing nothing but strangling us with our own political correctness*” (cited in Blake, p.143, 2011) there was also space within the populist discourse of power vs. underdog to criticise the government alone. Both ways of positioning the government as being equivalent to and also enabling the ‘threatening’ Muslim ‘other’ and also as being a power that was wilfully ignoring the ‘people’ were articulated within the EDL’s populist discourse.

It is also interesting to note that during the narrative interviews several of the narrators used key phrases in relation to their complaints against government, such as ‘indigenous people’ or ‘indigenous worker’ or ‘failed multiculturalism’ when speaking to me. Such phrases did not ordinarily fit some of the narrators’ syntax and speech. For example, Ian who would rarely use complex terms when discussing the government or Muslims with me, told me on numerous occasions that there was a real threat to the “*indigenous people of this country*” because of government policy, yet when I asked him what the term ‘indigenous’ meant he either dodged the question or looked at me as if the term was self-evident and

needed no explanation. Bill also regularly used the phrase ‘failed multiculturalism’ and yet seemed unsure of its precise meanings. He once told me that:

It’s the immigration issue for me all the way, that’s my problem with our government ... it’s the government’s fault that it’s let multiculturalism fail us, they have let too many foreigners in all trying to integrate. You know what I mean, trying to be multicultural and they can’t can they? So it’s failed multiculturalism... We talk about it on demos, the speakers and that, about how they [the government] don’t give a toss about what it, what failed multiculturalism does to us normal blokes (Bill, Interview 1).

Bill vaguely knew what ‘failed multiculturalism’ was, just like Ian seemed to have a vague sense of who ‘indigenous people’ were, and both linked the phrases with the immigration issue and government failure, however, neither seemed to have a precise grasp of the concept. One thus starts to suspect that it is a case of them hearing the phrases often enough and then using such phrases as a rather broad mallet with which to smash the government on the head, without really understanding the intricacies of and context regarding such terms. This is, of course, not altogether surprising because at its core populism is a simplifying logic, it is not necessary to know the precise details or relevant concepts it is simply enough to know that “*it’s the government’s fault*”.

The EDL’s narrative of government within its discourse was certainly hostile and government was dually positioned as both enabling the threat of Islamist extremism due to its pandering to the Muslim minority but was also identified as the institutional power that failed in its duty towards the ordinary people of the country, this second positioning was, of course linked to unfulfilled demands. Whilst the EDL’s discourse may have drawn most attention for its anti Muslim message, the government was also a key ‘other’ that was constructed within the EDL discourse often intrinsically connected to the threat of the Islamic ‘other’. This positioning of government as an antagonistic ‘other’ further served to construct the ‘people’, just as the people were those who were threatened by the Muslim other, so the people were also constructed as an underdog who had been abandoned by a government who had failed them.

5.1.4 Police

The police held a complex position within the EDL’s understanding of itself as a movement; whilst Muslims and government were constructed as enemies of

the people and through a process of antagonism and equivalence were simplified and positioned as external ‘others’ standing against the ‘the people’; the EDL’s antagonistic relationship with the police was more complex. The police had first been constructed as weak and ineffective by their lack of action against the Islamist extremists who had abused British soldiers in Luton in 2009; however, once national demonstrations began the EDL struggled physically with the police and often made claims regarding police brutality, a lack of impartiality and false arrests. To further add to the complexity of the relationship the EDL also often constructed ordinary low ranking officers as simply ordinary ‘people’ doing their jobs and being led by an overly ‘politically correct’ leadership who were part of the ‘establishment other’.

This complex relationship with the police, which ranged from open violent hostility to attempting to include ordinary low ranking ‘coppers’ into the discursive construction of ‘us’ as the ordinary people, demonstrates an interesting dynamic of populism and demonstrates the contingency of the ‘us’ and ‘them’ identity that, at its limits, is always in flux. At demonstrations (see section below) the relationship between the EDL and the police was often highly antagonistic as police, UAF counter demonstrators and the EDL wrestled for control of the demo space. The EDL certainly expressed hostility towards the police, typically complaining that:

We’ve lost count of the times we’ve discovered that EDL supporters have found themselves mistreated by the police or arrested only to be released without charge (EDL Online article, 12th January 2012).

Several of the narrators had a story about police harassment, excessive use of force or general belligerence; obviously the accuracy of these stories is impossible to verify, yet the fact that they were told is what is important in understanding how the police were constructed within the EDL discourse. Adam, who had attended many demonstrations, did not particularly dislike the police he met at demos, however, he told me that they regularly ‘picked on the EDL’:

They have a job to do, just like we have a job to do, but we don’t get paid to demonstrate whereas they are just following the orders to get their dosh for the week. So I think we are, erm, what you would say, [pauses for a few seconds] we are more committed than the police... they try it on, they

shove video cameras in your face and shit like that but it's just stunts you know, they just try it on, best to ignore them, we have a right to be there, to protest, its democratic isn't it? But they can get handy, they can get nasty with their batons and the dogs if they decide to. I have seen lads have their heads smashed in by them, dog bites and all that, usually for no reason (Adam, Interview 3).

We see here that Adam is almost philosophical about what the police do, they are seen as part of the EDL's existence, however, even though he seems fairly neutral regarding the police he was still willing to say that he had seen fellow EDL members injured 'usually for no reason'. David seemed somewhat conflicted about the police, he had previously admitted to me that he was a "law and order bloke, I like police to be tough on scum who wreck the country" (David, Interview 1), however, when the police got 'tough' on the EDL he started to reconsider his views on policing. In his most candid discussion with me he described one demonstration he had attended:

To me it was like they were determined to beat us, to give us a bloody nose, they were wearing like military gear and shoulder pads and shields they had them big fixed riot truncheons you see on American TV. They just went for us and all we were doing was protesting, we were being democratic in a democratic country at the end of the day... There may have been a few of us, the youngsters, younger ones you see, who had maybe chucked a few bottles or something, I didn't see any of that mind you, I was just told about it after. But they [the police] went to town on us. Was a scary experience and it makes you think, we pay their wages and they do that to us when we are acting just democratically, to protest on behalf of our country, makes me think, who are they protecting when they act like that? (David, Interview 2).

For David, this caused somewhat of a crisis of understanding; he believed that the police should be tough on those who he felt deserved it yet his encounter with police action during his EDL activities had left him feeling hostile towards the police. Other narrators also expressed animosity towards the police, especially Eve, who always spoke about the police in a rather sententious manner:

It's all about being in the right and I know they don't act right, they are bullies, the lot of them. They stand around with their batons looking down their noses at us, especially us girls. If we were black or Asian they would be treating us differently, they love the Asians, can't do enough for them. Race relations and all that effort, but when it's white English people they are happy to treat us like dirt, like second class and they use excessive force on the young lads... The police ain't right, they know it, we know they are corrupt, you only have to read the news stories (Eve, Interview 1).

However, Eve's view that 'all police' were bad was not one that most of the narrators agreed with. Even those, like Chris, who complained about 'heavy handed' tactics by the police acknowledged that *"it aint easy for them on demo days, we can give them grief and the UAF are there as well, playing up... I think they am over the top but I would be the same if I was them, probably, because they need to do the job and most of the P.C.s are just normal blokes doing a job"* (Chris, Interview 2). Even the EDL article that was cited above that complained about police harassment and wrongful arrests goes on to say that:

In the majority of cases, the individual officers brought in to police our demonstrations cope well with what must be a difficult situation, and are very often courteous and helpful...the majority of police officers recognise that their role is to help facilitate a peaceful protest and to deal with any trouble-makers – on either side (EDL Online Article, 12th January, 2012).

The tone taken here is one of understanding which acknowledges difference and is certainly not the way in which the EDL discourse constructs Muslims or Government whose internal differences are obliterated and who are instead constructed as an homogenous antagonistic 'other' through the logic of equivalence. The EDL discourse is instead willing to differentiate police officers between the 'normal' ordinary officers who are seen as 'often courteous and helpful' and the 'political leadership' who are constructed as the problematic other. The article goes on to state *"the majority of police officers no doubt do this country a service, there are certainly some – often in positions of influence – whose politics have at times seriously undermined their judgment"* (EDL Online Article, 12th January, 2012).

What can be suggested is that for the EDL the police, despite the violence and arrests that occur on demo day, are seen simply as a tool of the state; as Jon ‘Snowy’ Shaw, a well known EDL speaker at demonstrations during the first two years of the movement, said at a demonstration at Newcastle when talking about alleged ‘heavy handed’ police tactics “*It’s a show of strength by the state to scare us all into giving up our fight*” (EDL online Published Speech, 2nd April, 2010). Because of this, ordinary police officers were not seen as being driven by malice towards the EDL, rather they were seen as being misused and politicised by the government in order to suppress the EDL. Indeed, on several demonstrations I overheard EDL stewards and members discussing the supposed support that ordinary officers showed the EDL and it was always rumored (see Chapter Three for example) that the police disliked the UAF counter demonstrators and felt sympathy for the EDL.

I saw an interesting example of how the police were constructed differently by the EDL and UAF whilst attending a small demonstration:

before we left, not much had happened, but a female UAF supporter was shouting at a handful of EDL members and the police intervened to escort her away. I was standing on the pavement in normal dress... The female UAF wearing yellow ‘Hope not Hate’ shirt called the police ‘Fascist sympathisers’. Words to that effect... Earlier these same police were being accused of being soft on Muslims by a bald headed EDL organiser (Field Diary, Grantham, 22/02/2014).

This shows how the positioning of the police is dependent upon which discourse is constructing them; for the EDL they are led by a politically correct leadership that panders to Muslim extremists who orders them to be unduly harsh on the EDL; for the Unite Against Fascism supporters the police are too sympathetic towards the EDL and act to prevent UAF activists from challenging this ‘fascism’. However, whilst the positioning of the police is different within the two discourses the complaints themselves are similar. When Weyman Bennett, joint secretary of Unite Against Fascism, was arrested by police at a 2010 EDL counter demonstration for conspiracy to commit violent disorder he told the BBC:

I have been to more than 200 demos and never been arrested. There is no evidence against me. This is not a good sign for democracy. Officers came up to me as soon as I arrived and said they would arrest me. They are hostile to anti-racists and there needs to be an investigation. Police neutrality needs to be questioned (BBC, News Website, 21st March 2010).

We can compare and contrast what Bennett said with what EDL leader Tommy Robinson said, in relation to his previous arrest, in a speech to the EDL at Leicester, also in 2010:

Police persecution is what I will talk about. You see all the police around here, it is not the police officers on the street, on the frontline, it is the hierarchy...My house was raided, with British police and machine guns, my children, my fiancé who is pregnant has been arrested...The truth is they would not dare to arrest a pregnant Muslim woman. You wouldn't fucking dare do it! (Tommy Robinson, Speech at Leicester, 9th October 2010).

The EDL certainly accused the police of being politicized and, like the UAF, also accused the police of bias and victimisation. After the mass arrests of EDL supporters in Walsall, the EDL sarcastically complained that the arrested members were “*convicted for being “threatening and aggressive”. Threatening and aggressive and having the wrong politics*” (EDL Online Article, 18th December, 2013). However, by and large, as the Robinson speech demonstrates, the EDL did not construct all police as a threatening ‘other’; rather they sought to construct police leadership as being part of the government and establishment ‘other’ who used ordinary police officers as tools to suppress the EDL. Indeed, the EDL often liked to tell themselves that the ‘ordinary coppers’ were really on their side and almost sought to include them within the identity of ‘the people’. This attempt at populist inclusivity, however, was difficult to reconcile with the violence that occurred on several demonstrations where police and EDL committed acts of physical violence against one another; during those demonstrations the boundary between ‘people’ and ‘police’ appeared much more antagonistic and therefore fixed rather than fluid, as it often was during non demo conversations.

5.1.5 Anti-Fascists

If the police often occupied a rather ambiguous position within the English Defence League's discourse the 'anti fascists' or 'left wingers' were a clearly defined 'other' who the EDL's discourse constructed as a clear threat to the existence of the movement and as an example of Government, Muslim and 'left wing' collusion within society. If the Muslim 'other' and the governing establishment were seen as a threat to 'the people' the Anti-Fascists, most notably the UAF (Unite Against Fascism) movement who shadowed the EDL at demonstrations and used the internet and social media to track and challenge the EDL, were seen as a threat to the EDL as a movement. The 'Anti-Fascists' or 'Left Wingers' were incorporated into a logic of equivalence that portrayed them as one point of a triangle of conspiracy along with Muslims and the Government/establishment.

There was universal disdain and contempt for the UAF and allied movements amongst all of this study's narrators and this was combined with violent confrontations at demonstrations and regular attacks on the internet and social media. Indeed, during the planning for demo days the UAF could often occupy the lion's share of discussion. As Adam noted:

We have to keep an eye out for them because they [UAF and other associated groups] will do their best to stop us protesting, they don't like democracy, they don't think we should be heard (Adam, Interview 1).

Copsey has noted that on the street "the EDL's primary antagonist is Unite Against Fascism, [which is] for the most part dominated by the Socialist Workers Party" (2010, p.32). During the EDL's lifetime it has not just struggled with the UAF on the streets, it has also struggled for moral supremacy, constructing the UAF as a belligerent movement that attempts to suppress the EDL's democratic right to protest. When discussing UAF, six of the narrators used the term democracy in order to frame the struggle between themselves and the UAF who shadow their demonstrations. For example, Harry explained that:

It's all about democracy as far as I am concerned, we live in a bloody democracy after all. If we want to peacefully protest then why shouldn't we? These 'anti-fascists' as they call themselves, turn up shouting us down

and trying to fight, I, I don't go there for a fight I go there because this country needs to change and we [the EDL] are bringing it, making it happen. They call us fascists, well what are they? They think we have no rights. Makes me angry mate, it really pisses me off (Harry, Interview 1).

This was a common response that many narrators focused on, they claimed it was their democratic right to protest and thus it was actually the anti-fascists who were acting in a fascistic manner; they equated democracy with the ordinary people represented by the EDL and Muslims and the UAF were portrayed as 'anti democratic' forces. Democracy was something the EDL focused on during demonstrations, accusing police of denying them their rights and constructing their enemies as anti – democratic and thus identifying themselves as the defenders of democracy. This speech by senior EDL activist and Tommy Robinson's cousin, Kevin Carroll, highlights the importance the EDL attached to democracy and their concern for it:

Millions died achieving this democracy...I stand before you today with a clear head and I say the light of democracy is slowly being smothered... (Speech to EDL activists, Bradford 28th August 2010).

Democracy was seen as being key to what the EDL was struggling for and they saw themselves as 'defending' democracy against the dangerous 'others'. The EDL thus constructed the UAF and 'anti-fascists' as a threat to democracy and as apologists for 'Muslims' and thus constructed themselves as normal people who believed in democracy and had a 'right' to protest and 'defend' themselves. As Fiona angrily told me :

All these left wing extremism lot, they all try and claim we are Nazis and Fascists and whatever and we just ain't. When I think about them, I think they are fascists because, we, we are normal English people, we are not all fascists just because we don't want to see our country destroyed by Sharia law and political correctness... It's okay for Muslims to protest about our soldiers, to abuse them. They don't get called fascists, the UAF don't protest at them, it's us, we have to stand up against the Muslims (Fiona, Interview 2).

Fiona's comments were at first hard to unpick, however, once seen through the prism of a populist discourse they become clearer. Muslims are again seen as one single threatening other, who the EDL were in her view, quite rightly, protesting against. Yet Fiona cannot understand the UAF's protest against the EDL because she believes that the EDL represent 'normal English people' and thus a protest against the EDL becomes a protest against all 'normal English people' who simply cannot be fascists. We see here how the identity of 'normal English people' is universalised to encompass everyone that is on the 'us' side of this antagonistic frontier.

For the narrators, the presence of the UAF and their claims that the EDL was fascist and racist seemed to be a genuinely upsetting allegation and it was a topic that elicited some of the most heated and personal responses. During a conversation about the UAF Chris, who was ordinarily relaxed during our discussions, asked me in a relatively forceful tone, if I thought he was a fascist; it was an interesting, if tense, role reversal:

Chris: Well what about you? You're politics educated and left wing, you must support those UAF, tell me, do you think I'm fascist? Am I?

Me: Of course I don't, no, no, no I don't think you're a fascist. I honestly don't think you are, they [the UAF] don't know what a fascist is. I think they misuse the term.

Chris: Well, a, a Nazi then, whatever the term. Am I a type of Nazi?

Me: No, you aren't. Your politics are not what I agree with, I don't agree but no I don't think you are bad, I don't think you are a Nazi. [pause] I think you are unfair, you're wrong to blame all Muslims but you aren't a fascist and I think you accuse them of things they haven't done.

This exchange remained with me because I could not call Chris a fascist, he was not a fascist in the true sense of the word, he was bigoted but I didn't see how calling him a bigot would have enhanced our conversation. He therefore saw my response as tacit support for the EDL, because the relationship between the EDL and UAF was zero sum, if you disagreed with the UAF that the EDL were fascists then you must, surely, agree with the EDL. What was perhaps most

striking about the EDL discourse regarding the UAF and the way that the UAF and ‘left wingers’ in general were constructed within the discourse is that they were accused of viewing the EDL en masse as ‘fascists’, which is, of course exactly the same logic of equivalent simplification that the EDL discourse constructed the Muslim ‘other’ as. For example Adam told me that:

The anti-fascists are supporting the real fascists, yeah, they are ‘cus the real fascists are the Muslims, all of ‘em. Who, they, they hate gays and make women hide in stupid fucking head gear. They are the fascists not us (Adam, Interview 3).

We thus see how the UAF and anti-fascists are constructed as supporting and even apologising for the behaviour of ‘Muslims’. At demonstrations the EDL would always insist that it was the UAF who caused violence, as David argued:

They [UAF] make us out to be the thugs. They always make us out to be in the wrong and the media believes them. But I’ve seen it with my own eyes, we are the victims of assaults they are the ones who kick off first. Our lads might retaliate, do you blame them? How can you blame them when you have got the UAF biting your heels. But we are calmer, we tend to be older, they am all Uni kids at the end of the day (Davis, Interview 2).

This was a narrative that the EDL leadership was always keen to articulate and one that all of the narrators appeared to, at least on the surface, accept. After trouble flared at one demonstration, leading to arrests on both sides, the EDL released the following statement on its website:

In a repeat of the incident earlier this year in Walthamstow, when EDL supporters were abused and attacked by the far-left troublemakers, tempers flared when, after a continued rain of abuse and provocation from United Against Racism members who had a staged counter demonstration and various other far-left protesters, EDL supporters reacted to insults and taunts (EDL Online Article, 18th December 2013).

The EDL were thus portraying themselves as the victims of ‘the far-left troublemakers’ and the EDL are thus constructed as simply defending themselves. This further provides the EDL with the identity of true democrats struggling against the violence and anti-democratic tendencies of the ‘far left’.

The EDL identity is thus universalised, they represent democracy and the ordinary people and they struggle to defend against the antagonistic others. On demonstration days the logic of equivalence provides a powerful collective identity, where the ‘us’ identity stands in physical antagonism against the ‘other’s’, especially UAF who were an almost constant presence at EDL demonstrations.

5.2 ‘Black and White Unite’ – The Equivalence of ‘Demo Days’

Demonstrations were the key collective activity that the English Defence League engaged in; whilst local divisions held meetings and individual members may occasionally hand out leaflets or engage in some other form of activity all of these other activities were geared towards sustaining and increasing attendance at demonstrations. ‘Demo days’ were highly ritualised events, with planning and ‘build up chatter’ taking place online days and weeks before the actual demonstrations. Locations were chosen by the organisers and EDL leadership and the demonstration would then be justified with reference to current or historical events (for example accusations of Muslim grooming gangs). Articles on the EDL website would be entitled “Why we are going to Rotherham” or “Why we are going to Peterborough”, or “Our Return to Tower Hamlets” and “We March for Justice”. Through these articles and via social media a narrative would be constructed explaining why it was important that EDL members turned out to the demonstration. As well as facilitating the overall aims of the EDL, each demonstration also, to a greater or lesser extent, tied in with the specific location that had been chosen. The narratives would make mention of Muslims, government and often the UAF counter demonstrators. Often the EDL would warn that confrontations may occur and would deploy a pre-emptive narrative to explain this disorder, for example an online article explained that:

There is never an excuse for violence, but even EDL members have the right to defend themselves against attack. The “heavy handed” police operation of cracking skulls does not facilitate peaceful protest, neither does the police letting opposition antagonists get close to our demonstrations facilitate peaceful protest. The authorities and media are all too willing to place the blame on the EDL for disorder, but it’s time

they admitted their responsibility for being part of the cause (EDL, Online Article 21/12/2013)

In total I attended ten national demonstrations in order to observe events, sometimes travelling with some of the narrators and other times attending alone to observe from outside of the EDL area. I also attended local meetings and a leafleting day, but these events were very much focused on organising and raising awareness of upcoming demonstrations. As highly ritualised events the EDL demonstrations usually followed a regularised pattern. Demonstrators would arrive, by train or coach, and meet up at a designated meeting point, usually a bar or pub. There was always a police presence and often a very heavy one, demonstrators movements would sometimes be restricted by barriers or cordons of police and the protest would progress to a designated area where speeches were made. Conflict, verbal and physical, with the police and counter demonstrators was a regular occurrence. There was often a carnival type atmosphere at the beginning of demonstrations but this could dissolve into violence as the demonstration progressed. Demonstrators were visible, wearing EDL branded apparel, England flags and other flags and banners representing other sectional groups.

At many EDL demonstrations, both those I attended and others, a very prominent message that was expressed via banners, flags, hooded tops and speeches was 'Black and White Unite Against Extremism' which is often shortened to simply 'Black and White Unite'. It is this message, along with the presence of other special interest groups who are present at demonstrations that shows how a populist discourse seeks to unite disparate elements against a common threat and this is something that has received scant attention within academic studies of the EDL. Because of the antagonism of demo days, anyone who was not in the EDL became an 'other', thus the EDL was able to include disparate groups and individuals within its identity because, simply, as long as they were not part of the constructed 'other' (Muslims, government, police and UAF counter demonstrators) they became part of the EDL identity.

It has been argued that the EDL, since its emergence, has been at pains to stress its 'solidarity' with "'floating groups', such as ethnic communities that share historical angst against Muslims, be that Sikhs or Jews" (Copsy, 2010, p.5). This has been assumed to be a cynical and deliberate 'ploy' in order to provide credence to the EDL's claims of being 'not racist'. Such an assumption is based upon a belief that the EDL is similar to other far right political parties and

movements, however, if we see the EDL as having, in Laclauian terms, a highly populist discourse, as this chapter argues, then this solidarity with a range of different groups is understood in a different way. The logic of equivalence that the EDL's populist discourse is based upon can just as easily simplify differences within the 'us' group as it can within the 'other' group. If the social-scape is simplified into an 'us' and 'them' dichotomy then the 'us' can logically include anyone who is not 'them' and, indeed, a highly populist discourse will seek to include as many in the 'us' camp as possible. We can thus understand the EDL's very prominent message of 'black and white unite', a sentiment emblazoned on banners, flags and highlighted in speeches at demonstrations, as epitomizing the very essence of a populist demo discourse.

Sociologist Les Back, writing in the early years of the new millennium, was struck by the fact that a new facet of hate was "increasingly being articulated through invocations of love" (2002, p.1). Back argued that the far right increasingly expressed racial division in terms of 'loving' one's own race rather than professing direct hatred towards other races. Because of this he asserted that such political movements were "capable of assimilating seemingly incompatible elements" (2002, p.1). However, Back's understanding was premised on the assumption that a love of 'us' could incorporate incompatible elements, yet for Laclau, this is operationalised in reverse 'we' are united through an antagonistic relation with the 'other'. Love of 'us' is not going to be particularly inclusive, whilst antagonism against 'them' allows for the active inclusion of anyone who is not identified as 'them'. EDL demonstrations were able to unite divergent groups who came together in a public expression of antagonistic struggle against the 'other' who had been identified through the EDL discourse as the cause of particularistic demands.

Whilst the English Defence League certainly attracted a large following amongst white urban males, who as the previous chapter has demonstrated often had differing demands, the movement also attracted other constituencies which formed special interest divisions that operated alongside the EDL's geographical divisions. These included an 'EDL Angels Division' for female supporters, an 'EDL LGBT Division' for the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community, along with 'Sikh' and 'Jewish' divisions. At the height of the EDL movement these special interest groups held a special place within the organisation and during demo days they were regularly seen on the streets. The very public array of different sectional groups and persons attending large

EDL demonstrations was initially quite shocking for me to witness, as my notes in my diary make clear:

As expected, England shirts, flags, scarves in abundance - Definitely were highlighting England. But also a Pink triangle flag and rainbow banner (LGBT), stars of David sign (I am told 'Jewish Division? But will need to check this) and signs mentioning a 'Sikh' Division... I was also made aware of the 'EDL Angels' (have previously been told about this division) but didn't see any signage relating to EDL Angels... It is obvious that numerous special interest groups exist and they were quite noticeable today...I was told that they argue that they are united against Islam and 'political correctness' (Field Diary, Birmingham 20/07/2013).

That such disparate groups were visibly united suggests that they were united against a dangerous other and this enabled a sense of collective identity which was further reinforced by physical proximity to those antagonistic others; such an understanding moves beyond reductionist accounts. Pilkington has noted "there is not one 'type' of person that is attracted to a movement like the EDL" (2016, p.90) and it was during demonstrations that this became evident.

Amongst the narrators who took part in this study there was a fairly strong commitment to attending EDL demonstrations, with four narrators saying that they went to 'almost every demonstration' between 2010 and 2014 and I also found many other EDL members who were extremely committed to the cause and concept of 'demo days'. It has been demonstrated above, and will be further highlighted in the next chapter, that the EDL had a profound and well developed anti-government discourse based upon members' demands; however, the most obvious target during EDL demonstrations were Muslims. Even speeches delivered at demonstrations that were anti-government were developed using a violent and crude anti-Muslim discourse. For example a speech made by a member of the EDL LGBT Division, whose one time leader went by the name of 'Tommy English', demonstrates how the 'Muslim' other was used as a way of attacking government:

Muslim extremists would deny us [LGBT community] our rights... Our very right to exist would be destroyed under Islam and it is our government that is allowing Sharia law, the law that would oppress us to be used in courts in this country... They [the government] have failed us... Only the EDL are

united to stop them [the government] from allowing creeping Sharia... This government hates us (reported on EDL online, 20/03/2012).

Such sentiments were common place at the majority of demonstrations, whilst chants of ‘*Allah, Allah, who the fuck is Allah*’ rang out, the EDL demonstrators would troop through city streets shepherded by police and confronted by counter demonstrators such as the UAF. This meant that every demonstration ultimately became a physical conflict, which was something EDL members seemed to relish, even if they at times complained. In Birmingham one EDL demonstrator, wrapped in an England flag and wearing jeans, loudly complained about the police blocking the street and finally, red faced and apoplectic with rage, began shouting “*leave us alone, leave us be*” which encouraged a group of around a dozen other (older) demonstrators to begin singing “let us be, let us be” to the tune of the Beatles’ song ‘Let It Be’ (Field Diary, Birmingham 20/07/2013) – a light hearted moment at what would turn out to be a violent demonstration.

It was always clear that EDL members wanted some form of opposition, for without an antagonistic opposition to stand against the EDL could not physically unite. Indeed, it was often during lulls at demonstrations where no opposition was present and police had backed away that tensions between EDL members occasionally arose, especially between competing geographical EDL divisions. These, however, re-united once an antagonistic presence was visible or mentioned and then with unity restored the collective action (chanting, booing, singing or violence) would begin.

I observed infighting between the EDL demonstrators on two occasions; in both instances the fighting began at the end of the demonstration, where frustrations were high because the EDL had been unable to get close to anti-fascist demonstrators. Both occasions involved small groups of young, drunk and extremely belligerent males and both instances were brought under control by a combination of other EDL members and police. Such instances served to demonstrate the ultimate fragility of any discursive construction and showed how without the antagonistic other within close proximity, the anger that was brought to demo days could result in intra group violence. Each instance was shrugged off by other EDL members as an inevitable consequence of the stresses of demo days. David told me after one instance that “*It’s just the way it is I guess, they get carried away, the police pen us in and treat us like animals and a few of the young ones end up acting that way and there is always a*

journalist with a camera ready to make us out to be thugs” (David, quoted as remembered in Field Diary 13/09/2014).

Whilst not all demonstrations became openly violent all included physical struggle, with EDL members, counter demonstrators and police struggling through the urban landscape in close proximity to one another. The urban landscape was often also physically altered by the local authorities on demo days: mesh fences erected, bollards put in place, police vans barricading roads and walkways and shops shuttered up. This transformation of the urban landscape into a specially constructed arena for conflict served to further highlight and construct antagonism. I noted in my field notes that:

Today we were hemmed in, where we were demonstrating felt closed in, I left quite quickly but it felt as if the EDL were on stage. A stage constructed by the authorities and which served as a physical limit that demonstrators actively sought to push against... I saw a group of EDL trying to push over a small fence at the side of the demonstration area, there appeared to be nothing beyond the fence of any importance. I can only assume that they were attacking the fence simply because it was there and represented the limit of the space that the authorities had granted the EDL (Field Diary, Rotherham 13/09/2014).

Thus the landscape of the demonstration also produced an equivalence between the EDL demonstrators in the sense that they were forced to share the same space, walk the same lines and see the city that they had travelled to from the same perspective. The landscape of the demonstration became a palimpsest, a landscape that had been altered for that day's antagonism, however, beneath this altered landscape one could still see its previous life when members of the public walked by nervously, or the occasional bus or taxi would drive past, or when the chanting mob would suddenly notice a pub or McDonald's restaurant that remained open.

This transformation of the landscape into a sterile 'demo zone' meant that often the only physical audience the demonstrations attracted was the antagonistic 'others' – riot police and anti-fascist demonstrators, all of whom were also key actors during demo days. Such physical presence, togetherness and threat serve to unify competing groups. As Juris has noted, the physical performance of protest is “characterised by... bodily awareness of co-presence among ritual participants who are physically assembled and share a mutual focus of

attention” (2008, p.65). An audience is thus less important than an opposition force. As Garry noted when I asked him if the public liked EDL demos “*I think they probably keep away and watch it on their news which always makes us look bad. It don’t matter though, it’s the action that counts. They know we were there standing up for ourselves*” (Garry, Interview 1).

Again we see the process of equivalence that operates within such demonstrations; EDL divisions from different parts of the country and divisions with different special interests were united and all shared a physical togetherness in opposition to the antagonistic other. This goes beyond simply the need or desire for emotional attachment or an ‘esprit de corps’ as laid out by Blummer (1951, p.205) and the later symbolic interactionist school, instead it served to confirm the populist discursive constructions of the EDL. On demo days the particularities became universalised – ‘Jews’, ‘Sikhs’ ‘women’, ‘gays’, ‘working class’ ‘white’ - become for a time ‘us’ in a physical struggle against ‘them’ and EDL members had the scars and arrests to prove that this struggle was ‘real’. Every time there was antagonism at demonstrations between the EDL and the police, or UAF or local Asian youths it reinforced the EDL’s populist discourse - it showed that ‘us’ (EDL members) were being prevented from being ‘us’ by ‘them’ (police, UAF etc). As Ian stated quite explicitly:

Ian: They fucking hate us all them lot do

Me: Which lot?

Ian: All of them, you know the cops, the Muslims and the anti-fascists. They come on every march, try to stop us but it never works we don’t stop do we? (Ian, Interview 1).

Similar statements were made by other narrators; Fiona told me that “*I think the powers that be and their mates in UAF don’t want us to demonstrate... They cause trouble for us, try and block us, block the routes...But it’s like our motto says ‘No Surrender’ and its true ‘cause we won’t let them silence us*” (Fiona, Interview 1). This message of ‘no surrender’ and of actively seeking out confrontation is used as a call for arms on demo days as we can see from the following extract which was published on the EDL website encouraging attendance ahead of a demonstration in Rotherham:

Add your voice to ours. Let the authorities know that we know their dirty little secrets... We will not stand still and quietly watch our society, our

communities, our children sacrificed on the altar of multicultural diversity. This is not some third-world country; this is England. We are the English Defence League and we will NOT surrender (EDL online article, 9th April, 2014).

The Lacanian ‘Lack’, a key concept for Laclau and Mouffe, could be seen in its starkest formulation in the paradox that exists in relation to EDL demonstrations. The EDL demonstrations needed an antagonistic other that made equivalent the differences between the EDL groups of supporters and united them physically on demo days against a common threat and which demonstrated the accuracy of the EDL’s populist discourse of a struggle between ‘us’ and ‘them’. At the same time this common threat was also deemed to be responsible for preventing the EDL from freely demonstrating without constraint, the ‘other’ was held responsible for disrupting the EDL’s identity as a street protest movement by, in the case of the UAF “*shouting us down and stopping our speeches*” (Harry, interview 2) and, in the case of the police by “*blocking off streets with shields and stopping us doing what we went there to do*” (Adam, Interview 3). Ultimately this demonstrates the necessity of an antagonistic relationship for collective identity because, as there will always exist a “primordial ‘lack’ of a satisfyingly stable identity”, so “the ‘other’ in all its symbolic forms can be blamed for the blocked identity” and thus there is a “continuing possibility of antagonism” (Townshend, 2004, p.271).

Typical demonstrations involved interaction between three key groups, the EDL, the counter demonstrators and the police. Police tactics would vary along with locations but in many cases the EDL and counter demonstrators were within shouting distance of each other. The EDL usually had stewards clad in fluorescent orange and yellow jackets whose job it was to attempt to prevent outbreaks of violence and maintain order within the EDL ranks. However, the efforts of the stewards (which was lackadaisical on some occasions) often failed and violence would then break out with police officers using batons, shields and dogs and EDL and UAF supporters hurling missiles at each other and the police. The inevitable outcome of such clashes involved injuries, arrests and further antagonism on all sides. These physical confrontations provided a stark visualisation of the antagonistic boundaries between the competing groups and even without direct physical confrontations, the EDL and the counter demonstrators would still interact, be that shouting abuse, chanting or simply ‘facing off’ with each other.

It is against such a backdrop that we must understand how demonstrations acted as a physical environment in which collective identity was strengthened. It is one thing to share a common discourse and identity, but when you stand together with your peers against an imminent physical threat the shared identity is magnified and thus reduced to its starkest logic – ‘us’ and ‘them’. Demonstrations were therefore not just the collective ‘output’ of the EDL discourse, they actually served to strengthen the equivalence between members, allowing for a sense of shared hardship, experience and understanding. As Adam explained:

It's being part of something big, bigger than me. We've all got each other's backs, we stand and fight together, against all of it and we stick together... It reminds me of the army, you know having blokes there to watch your back. It's great, a great feeling when we stand together... we don't move, we don't make way for them, for the cops or the extremist left. We stick together (Adam, Interview 2).

That Adam compared being in the EDL as being similar to being in the army is important, it highlights the very strong identity bonds that were formed through the confrontational atmosphere of demonstrations. Whilst the EDL's populist discourse created this sense of identity it was at demonstrations that the bonds were properly strengthened; as Busher found in his own ethnography of the EDL, the movement was “culturally accessible to the broad demographic to which it sought to appeal” (2016, loc1790 ipad). I found that it was the demonstrations' rituals and the antagonism that existed that allowed for this accessibility – anyone could come and stand with the EDL and they would recognise the flags and banners and they would be treated in the same hostile manner by both police and counter demonstrators. So, whilst the EDL's discourse divided the social-scape into two antagonistic camps it was at demonstrations that this antagonism manifested itself and provided a feedback to the discourse, thus further strengthening the discursive constructions.

The large scale EDL demonstrations were where the EDL was able to demonstrate its inclusivity, allowing different special interest groups to be part of these violent Islamophobic and anti-establishment demonstrations. This allowed EDL supporters to feel that they were part of a ‘crusade’ of united groups against the ‘other’ and this further increased the potency of the logic of equivalence. It was no surprise that I witnessed individuals dressed up as ‘crusader’ knights at three demonstrations. This rhetoric was shared by the EDL

leadership; in an article entitled ‘EDL Freedom Fighters’ the EDL made reference to the “*giants of English history: Milton, Locke and Orwell*” and claimed that the EDL was fighting for freedom and promised that “*we will continue to ‘tell the authorities what they don’t want to hear’ and keep the flame of freedom burning*” (EDL Website, 24/05/2014). It was the demonstrations that allowed members to be actively part of this ‘crusade’, to act as ‘freedom fighters’ taking on the dangerous other. Garry once told me that “*at first I didn’t really like demos, takes effort, but you can’t just be a laptop warrior you have to get out on the streets and take them on... we are committed*” (Garry, Interview 3). Likewise, when I asked Eve, who always seemed more reserved about demos, if she enjoyed attending she answered that “*I have to do it, it’s the only way my voice can be heard and it’s the only way to fight them*” (Eve, Interview 1).

Conclusion

Laclau is clear that there can be “no populism without [the] discursive construction of an enemy” and that the “equivalence proceeds entirely from the opposition to the power beyond the frontier” (Laclau in Panizza, 2005, p.39). In this chapter it has been demonstrated that the EDL’s populist discourse actually constructs several ‘others’. Rather than simply focusing on Muslims, as has been assumed previously (for example, Kassimeris and Jackson, 2015), or government, as traditional populist discourses are assumed to do (for example, Stavrakakis and Katsambekis, 2014) the EDL’s discourse actually constructs several ‘others’. Muslims and government were constructed as equivalent and the anti-fascist counter demonstrators were also constructed as the EDL’s most constant and present enemy during demonstrations. It has been shown that the police occupy a complex position within the EDL narrative, in that low ranking ‘ordinary’ officers occupy a place at the limit of the EDL discourse where at some points they are drawn into the identity of ‘ordinary people’ suffering from poor leadership and the political correctness of the government. However, because of the physical confrontations at demonstrations the police are also regularly seen as an enemy who threaten the EDL’s identity by preventing them from exercising their democratic right to protest; thus the EDL see themselves as victims of heavy handed tactics.

Democracy also acted as a nodal point within the EDL discourse and helped create an antagonistic frontier within EDL discursive constructions of ‘others’ with Muslims and those who challenged the EDL portrayed as anti-democratic, and thus the EDL representing themselves as the defenders of democracy. In that way democracy and ordinary people were universalised and the discourse was able to include anyone who was not a member of the ‘other’ groups that were constructed as external threats. Demonstrations also followed the populist logic of equivalence and allowed for inclusivity, allowing for a range of different groups to be included in the physical struggle against the UAF and police during demo days and these other groups were seen as sharing in the victimisation that they suffered at the hands of police and counter demonstrators. It was argued that the EDL’s discourse became more violent and crude on demo days when a clearly Islamophobic message was vocally spread and where physical confrontation further enhanced and strengthened the EDL’s collective identity.

This chapter has therefore examined the key aspects of the EDL’s discursive construction of ‘others’ with reference to antagonism and equivalence; however, this alone does not provide a full understanding of how the EDL’s collective identity was constructed. In the next chapter we will examine the empty signifier that provided the ‘thematic’ representation for the EDL’s collective identity. As Laclau has stressed, “Populism does not define the actual politics of these organisations, but is a way of articulating their themes – whatever those themes may be” (Laclau in Panizza, 2005, p.44). Thus whilst we have identified the antagonism and equivalence that exists within the EDL’s populist discourse we have yet to examine the way in which the movement sought to represent itself. Whilst an identity of ‘the people’ was constructed in opposition to the enemy ‘other’, the EDL sought to represent the people specifically as victims which, although impossible, was attempted through the empty signifier of ‘Victim’. We need to examine this empty signifier because it is intricately related to the external ‘others’ that we have examined in this chapter. Also, by understanding the empty signifier and the EDL’s struggle to portray themselves and the people as ‘victims’ we can understand the wider hegemonic struggles that existed within victimhood as a representative signification.

Chapter Six: Victims United – Analysing the Empty Signifier

This chapter contains some material that the author has previously had published in a peer reviewed academic journal (reference: Oaten, A. 2014, “The Cult of the Victim: an analysis of the collective identity of the English Defence League” in ‘Patterns of Prejudice’ vol.48 iss.4 pp.331-349)

The construction of a ‘people’ would be impossible without the operation of mechanisms of representation. As we have seen, identification with an empty signifier is the sine qua non for the emergence of a ‘people’...the empty signifier can operate as a point of identification only because it represents an equivalential chain...The empty signifier is something more than the image of a pre-given totality: it is what constitutes that totality, thus adding a qualitatively new dimension (Laclau, 2007, pp.161-162).

The empty signifier enables the establishment of a chain of equivalences...a political community is not constituted around a “heart” or a shared essential quality, but, instead, around an empty signifier, which represents the pure and perfect but impossible identity of the community, and defines an antagonistic boundary defining their limits – i.e., excluding the fundamentally different “other” (Glasze, 2007, p.662).

These Left wingers, the left like the UAF they all claim to be interested in human rights but they don’t give a fuck about our rights. They moan about Muslims being harassed by the cops and us but they don’t care when the cops harass us do they or when we get arrested for no reason, how about when Muslims beat up white EDL?... If it’s one of us lying in the street bleeding then they don’t ask about it, they don’t want to know...They weren’t making a noise when them Muslims were nicked and jailed for trying to blow us up at a march. No, no, they only care about ethnic minority rights...So, yeah, yeah it’s okay for us to be assaulted, ‘cus we ain’t human to them so no one cares when we are the victims. Our rights ain’t worth shit as far as the left are concerned (Adam, Interview 3).

Introduction

In the previous chapter we examined how ‘others’ were positioned within the EDL’s discourse and demonstrated how the EDL’s populist discourse constructed an antagonistic frontier that defined ‘us’ and ‘them’. Making reference to the logic of equivalence we argued that the EDL’s construction of others simplified the social-scape and allowed the EDL to incorporate different

groups into its identity, simply because these groups were not the ‘other’. It was also argued that demonstration days were a core aspect of the populist identity, strengthening the collective identity of the EDL through the logic of equivalence. Thus the EDL’s discourse was highly populist because of its simplification of the social-scape.

This chapter will address this thesis’ third and final research aim, which is:

- Identify the empty signifier that produced equivalence within the EDL identity and identify what impact this empty signifier has on the EDL collective identity

In order to address this question we will first address the literature on empty signifiers and argue that ‘victim(s)’ can indeed be understood as an empty signifier. The concept of victim as a collective identity will then be briefly examined and by utilising studies from post-conflict zones it will be shown how collective victim status can be an empowering collective identity. We will then draw on primary and secondary research in order to empirically demonstrate and analyse the role that ‘victim(s)’ played within the EDL’s discourse; highlighting the role that the empty signifier played in making sense of the dislocatory event and the narrators demands. The chapter will then thematically examine various aspects of the discourse and identities that were organised via ‘victim(s)’ as an empty signifier, these being ‘the people’, ‘England’, ‘the leader’ and ‘the movement’ and it will be shown how each of these is positioned by the empty signifier

6.1 Understanding the Empty Signifier

In order to elucidate the role of equivalence and antagonism in the construction of ‘others’ it was necessary for us to, temporarily, ‘bracket off’ a core mechanism of any populist discourse – the empty signifier. Empty signifiers are essential for any political project and identity because they provide the illusion of fullness, of a complete identity, and therefore “the articulation of a political discourse can only take place around an empty signifier” (Howarth and Stavrakakis in Howarth et al, 2000, p.9). The empty signifier thus represents the ‘us’ and, in terms of a populist discourse, through the logic of equivalence stands in for all of the differential demands made. We have examined how the identity of us ‘the people’ was constructed via antagonism against the ‘other’,

with a frontier that included some whilst excluding others. This antagonism occurs because, as Laclau explains:

The radical contingency of the social shows itself...in the experience of antagonism. If the force that antagonizes me negates my identity, the maintenance of that identity depends on the result of a struggle (Laclau, 1990, p.183).

At the heart of this struggle is the act of representation: an empty signifier must therefore act to represent the 'us' who stand in opposition to 'them'. Whilst we have used the term 'the people' up until now, that is too vague a term; indeed, as Reyes has noted in his study of 'community' as an empty signifier in New Labour policy, there is a need for a discourse to provide "representation of those otherwise vague terms" (in Howarth and Torfing, 2005, p.244) by presenting a dominant subject position. Whilst a populist discourse splits the social-scape into 'us' and 'them', 'the people' and the 'other', there remains a need to order the discourse around an empty signifier that must, importantly for a populist discourse, also represent the differential demands that first made the emergence of the EDL possible.

The 'people' were never a demand; instead they were constructed via an antagonistic opposition against an enemy who is held responsible for their demands going unfulfilled. An empty signifier must be articulated in order to represent the people and the differential demands and also to provide a dominant and privileged subject position in which to understand events and provide meaning to the discourse. As Laclau notes:

the equivalential chain cannot be the result of a purely fortuitous coincidence, but has to be consolidated through the emergence of an element which gives coherence to the chain by signifying it as a totality. This element is what we have called the 'empty signifier' (in Panizza, 2005, p.44).

This chapter will argue that the empty signifier that provided meaning and produced equivalence within the EDL's discourse was that of 'victim(s)'. It will be demonstrated that 'victim(s)' acted as an empty signifier and was key to the EDL's discourse from the very beginning. It thus provided a way of representing a privileged subject position within the discourse (that of the 'victim') and thus presented an effective way of understanding why individual subjects' demands had not been fulfilled and further helped the EDL explain

why they were so often challenged by government, counter demonstrators, the police, the media and local communities.

Whilst we have already discussed populism at length in Chapter Two, it is here important to address one key issue regarding the role that ‘the people’ play within a populist discourse. As has already been demonstrated, populism constructs enemies who are responsible for a fundamental lack; and a populist discourse constructs ‘the people’ as an identity in antagonistic opposition against the establishment other who is seen as “being in alliance with internal and external enemies that antagonize nation, culture, and people” (Dryberg in Critchley and Marchart, 2008, p.246). We have, however, demonstrated that within the EDL discourse ‘others’ not only referred to the establishment but also to ‘internal and external’ enemies such as Muslims, the left and, at times, the police. Whilst we have seen that the EDL divided and simplified the social-scape into ‘the people’ and ‘the others’ who are a threat to ‘the people’, this is only part of the discursive construction. This chapter will argue that ‘the people’ are represented as ‘victims’ and that it is ‘victim(s)’ that serves to stand in for and makes equivalent the competing differential demands and different identities that were incorporated into the EDL; ‘victim(s)’ also allowed the discourse to explain the dislocatory event that led to the EDL’s emergence.

This argument may, however, be contentious to some approaches that argue that for a movement to be populist ‘the people’ must be the empty signifier that represents the heterogeneous demands and identities. Whilst it is correct that the EDL does construct ‘the people’ as being in opposition to the establishment, Muslims, the left and police, it is actually ‘the people’ constructed as ‘victims’ that acts to produce meaning to the EDL discourse, as this chapter will show. Therefore whilst ‘the people’ remain a key focus and are constructed through a process of equivalence and antagonism it is as ‘victims’ that the EDL understand themselves as a movement, England as a nation and the people who belong to the nation. Thus, ‘victim’ becomes the EDL discourse’s empty signifier, a way in which the discourse makes sense of events and represents both itself and the collective identity of the ‘others’.

Stavrakakis and Katsambekis insist that a populist discourse must meet two criteria, the first one being that the discourse is “articulated around the nodal point ‘the people’” (2014, p.123); thus if ‘the people’ are not the absolute centre of the discourse then the movement cannot, according to this view, be populist. Such an approach, however, is too restrictive, for we have clearly shown that

the EDL construct ‘the people’ via an antagonistic relationship with ‘the other’ and thus it meets the second criteria laid out by Stavrakakis and Katsambekis that a populist discourse is:

predominantly antagonistic, dividing society into two main blocs: the establishment, the power block, versus the underdog, ‘the people’ (in opposition to dominant political discourses asserting the continuity of the social fabric and prioritizing non-antagonistic technocratic solutions) (2014, p.123).

The fact that the EDL simplify the social-scape via equivalence and antagonism into ‘us’ and ‘them’, with ‘us’ being seen as ‘the people’ has been demonstrated, what will here be asserted is that ‘victim’ plays the key role of empty signifier representing ‘the people’ who have been constructed through a process of antagonism and equivalence. The people are thus seen as ‘victims’ of the establishment and as victims of other enemies, in particular Muslims and the left. In actuality this fits well with the supposition, made by Stavrakakis and Katsambekis and even Laclau himself, which asserts that the people are constructed as the ‘underdog’ (Laclau, 2007, p.87) which points to the notion of victimhood and victims.

Indeed, Laclau himself seems to accept that whilst we can use the term ‘the people’ to refer to the identity that stands in opposition to the regime and other enemies, the exact “privileged signifiers” can vary, and he notes that “the ‘people’, the ‘nation’, the ‘silent majority’, and so on” can “condense in themselves the signification of a whole antagonistic camp” (Laclau, 2007, p.87). Therefore we can argue that it is the process that makes a discourse populist, rather than there simply having to be constant quantitative reference made, specifically, to ‘the people’; an empty signifier must act to represent the people and in the case of the EDL this empty signifier is ‘victim(s)’.

For Laclau populism is about “putting into question the institutional order by constructing an underdog as an historical agent – ie. an agent which is an *other* in relation to the way things stand” (in Panizza, 2005, p.47). Thus, by representing the people, the movement and the nation as ‘victims’ of the establishment, Muslims, the left and police the EDL’s discourse constructed just such an historical agent, appealing to ‘the people’ who felt ‘victimised’ by the

current system and by contemporary social issues. This allowed the EDL's discourse to be inclusive, enabling all who felt that they were victims to be included whilst at the same time providing a dominant subject position.

Indeed 'victim' is the populist empty signifier par excellence because of its inherent vagueness and, paradoxically, its high political capital. Because if "populist unification takes place on a radically heterogeneous social terrain" then "any kind of unity is going to proceed from an inscription (the popular symbols) being irreducible to the contents which are therein inscribed" (Laclau, 2007, p.98); and thus 'victim(s)' is an effective empty signifier because of its inherent vagueness coupled with its political recognition and can therefore represent a heterogeneous 'people' and their differential demands.

6.2 – Conceptualising 'Victim(s)' as a Collective Identity

Focusing on the victim identity of the EDL may appear insensitive to the communities that the movement has targeted. However, to focus on the victim identity of the EDL is neither to accept nor deny the EDL's claims of victim status, but rather to acknowledge what the EDL says as an organisation and how its members narrate their experiences. Before beginning our examination of 'victim' as an empty signifier it is first necessary to interrogate the concept of 'victim' with reference to the literature on the subject. This will provide us with an understanding of 'victim(s)' and victimhood which can be seen as the means of creating a collective identity as well as emphasising and positioning a dangerous other who is thus seen as antagonistic to those who identify themselves as victims. Furthermore, by drawing on literature from post-conflict studies, a collective victim identity can be seen not only as capable of maintaining antagonism towards the other but also of sustaining it indefinitely because being identified as a pure 'victim(s)' is impossible and thus requires constant struggle against the forces that are denying this identity.

The term 'victim' is usually encountered in contemporary cultural practice as a way to describe and understand an individual or group of individuals who, due to events such as crime, war or natural disaster, have suffered through no fault of their own (Bar-Tal et al, 2009, p.231). In this conceptualization, 'victim' is seen as a label; one becomes a 'victim' by being constructed as a 'victim'

because of some perceived misfortune suffered outside of one's control. This relatively common understanding of 'victim' suggests that victims are constructed this way by hegemonic discourses. It is understood that those who are labelled 'victims' are expected to act in a certain way, to play the role assigned to them (van Dijk, 2009, p.2), namely, to be vulnerable, helpless and suffering. This is of crucial relevance to our current examination of 'victim(s)' as an empty signifier within the EDL's populist discourse. This is because, if 'victim(s)' or victimhood is understood in this way, then a movement attempting to portray itself as 'victim(s)' and identifying themselves with a discourse that stressed their victimhood would tacitly be acknowledging themselves as passive and helpless as being labelled a victim can suggest a loss of agency. However, this loss of agency remains true only when that victim is labelled as such by a discourse that presents 'victims' as weak and oppressed. Other discursive constructions can actually imbue victim(s) and victimhood with powerful political and social agency.

Post-conflict studies have demonstrated how some discourses can actually construct 'victim(s)' as a positive and powerful collective identity. Luc Huyse has argued that at the collective level there has been "a shift from the cult of the hero to the cult of the victim. Suffering instead of heroism now attracts public and political consideration" (2003, p.63). Here Huyse is referring to a very particular type of discursively constructed victim, namely, collective victims from violent conflicts. Such discourses lead to what Dianne Enns describes as the "victim...assum[ing] the status of an identity" (2007, p.3). In their study of victimhood in post-agreement Northern Ireland, Ferguson, Burgess and Hollywood argue that collective or group victimhood can be "powerful" and can "highlight the plight of the situation faced by the group" (2010, p.875).

Thus for a collective movement victimization can help to demonstrate a collective plight and can also attract others who either sympathise with the group's victim status or who themselves feel somehow victimised. This leads to a construction of shared victimhood which creates an antagonistic frontier between 'victims' and 'oppressors' who held power for the victims' position and were thus perceived as responsible for their victimhood. We see here similarities with Laclau's conception of populism as a struggle between "the oppressed underdog" and the "dominant groups" (2007, p.87). Ferguson, Burgess and Hollywood further argue that collective group victimhood is a

‘way to gain an advantage for “your” community at the expense of the “other”’ (2010, p.878).

Discourses that empower ‘victim(s)’ as a justified collective group in opposition to those who were responsible for the victimization have profound consequences for the social-scape. The most profound consequence is that for a victim to exist there must be a perpetrator. This therefore becomes a zero-sum identity which is, nonetheless, impossible to achieve, because if ‘we’ are victims then we need ‘others’ to be the perpetrators and yet those perpetrators will not acquiesce to our demands of victimhood. Hence collective victimhood requires an antagonistic collective ‘other’ for there can be no victim without an oppressive other - the perpetrators. This means that discourses that stress “victimhood experiences can bear catastrophic consequences for inter-group relationships” (Noor et al, 2012, p.351).

We can therefore argue that within some discourses ‘victim(s)’ acts as a way of dividing the social-scape along an antagonistic frontier that separates ‘victim(s)’ and ‘perpetrator(s)’ as two simplified identities, in much the same manner as populist discourses do. We can now suggest that ‘victim(s)’ can function as an empty signifier within a populist discourse as it operates to a similar logic. Laclau stresses that “The construction of a ‘people’ would be impossible without the operation of mechanisms of representation” (2007, p.161); for a populist discourse such representation must function to simplify identities and make equivalent the competing differential demands.

The importance of this ‘victim’ identity for the EDL’s self understanding can be initially highlighted here by examining two specific events. The first relates to the murder of soldier Lee Rigby in May 2013. In a series of articles and statements published by the EDL after his death Rigby was declared a “*Victim of Islamic brutality*” (EDL Website, 26th May, 2013) and a “*Victim of a failed government*” (EDL Facebook Page, 24th May, 2013). In yet another article entitled “*Islam is to Blame*”, Rigby’s victimhood was expanded to encompass the EDL and ‘the people’ in general; the language is vague but it is clearly constructing an ‘us’ as victims; it says “*We are demonised, violence against us is quietly excused, and we become legitimate targets in the eyes of Islamic extremists*” (30th May, 2013).

Soon after, the EDL was once more using Rigby's death as a way of reinforcing their discourse around victimhood. After an EDL demonstration in Woolwich, where Rigby was murdered, was disrupted by counter demonstrators the EDL complained of its victimization at the hands of the authorities. In two posts, one entitled '*victims of Woolwich*', the EDL complained about the "*failure of the British authorities to prevent violent left wing or Islamist thugs from disrupting EDL events*", which "*means that the British state is effectively in violation of its international human rights commitments*"; the article goes on to state that the "*British state should stop persecuting dissidents*" (EDL Website, 17th July, 2013). Use of human rights language should not come as a surprise; as we have already seen, the EDL's mission statement created early in the movement's life was wrapped in the language of 'progressive' human rights movements:

The English Defence League (EDL) is a human rights organisation that was founded in the wake of the shocking actions of a small group of Muslim extremists who, at a homecoming parade in Luton, openly mocked the sacrifices of our service personnel(EDL, Mission Statement).

The EDL also made mention of a cause that has long been associated with the 'progressive' left, that of Stephen Lawrence and the treatment of his family at the hands of the authorities, especially the Metropolitan Police. The EDL article went on to link the Stephen Lawrence case with the alleged persecution of the EDL. The article stated that there were "*smear squads in the Met that tried to demonise the family of Stephen Lawrence*" and that this "*black ops unit*" also targeted the EDL (EDL Website, 1st July, 2013). Concern for the family of Stephen Lawrence is something that one may not expect within the EDL, but in a movement that is centred on victimhood these usual barriers are removed. We see here how a victim identity leads to the identification of antagonistic 'others' (in this case the police and the government), who are identified as oppressors and deemed responsible for the victimization being suffered by members of the movement.

To those outside of the EDL's discourse, such claims of victimhood may seem ridiculous, however to those inside the discourse it is a firmly held belief. Only members of the group and those who share its discursive constructions of collective victimhood are able to recognise the claims of victim status because, as Bar-Tal et al explain: "group members experience this sense [of

victimization] on the basis of their identification with the group” (2009, p.234). I also found that for my narrators, concerns for the family of Stephen Lawrence did not appear altogether cynical, rather in several cases when we discussed the EDL’s interest in the case I got responses that I was not expecting. Chris told me that I should not be shocked that the EDL are interested in a black family’s victimisation because:

Whatever you may think we aint racist and we understand, well those lads who are stitched up by the police at demos and by special branch do, we understand what it was like for the Lawrence family. They were fighting the government just like we are now, they were the victims. Only difference is I suppose is that the media aint got no sympathy for us really... The left wingers think they are the only ones who can feel sorry for the Stephen family people, they say we aint allowed to mention it because we are racists, that’s what they tell us (Chris, Interview 3).

The second incident relates to an arson attack on a Mosque in Bury Park, Luton, in April 2012, following this attack the EDL released an official press release via its official website. In an article with the rather misleading title of “*EDL Condemn Luton Mosque Attack*”, the “dichotomous and non-divisible” nature of constructed collective victimhood is clearly displayed (Noor et al, 2012, p.354). The article begins by stating: “*Around the world Muslims are regularly burning Christian Churches*”. The statement then goes on to assert that the “*Islamists and their apologists would have you believe that attacks against Muslims are at an all-time high*”. The reader’s attention is then drawn to the most important point, one that the rest of the piece is dedicated to ‘proving’: “*Mosques in the UK have been burned before ... by Muslims themselves to discredit their opposition and to play the victim—which they are very good at doing despite the truth being in front of everyone’s eyes*”. We may expect an ‘Islamophobic’ movement to openly celebrate the burning of a mosque but instead the piece goes on to emphasize that “*we do not endorse attacks on mosques*” (EDL Website, 3rd April, 2012).

What is actually happening here is a struggle over victimhood. Even after an attack on a mosque, the EDL’s discursive construction of Muslims refuses to accept that Muslim others can be ‘victims’, because there can only be one group of victims – the EDL movement and ‘the people’ they seek to represent. We

thus see how the EDL's discourse will not allow victimhood to be appropriated by the Muslim 'other'. This is because the construction of collective identity necessarily requires a process of simplification, of reduction (Torfing, 1999, p.124). The Muslim other, simplified and reduced to the role of perpetrator, cannot be allowed any claim to victim status, even after an attack on a mosque, because victimhood is a zero-sum identity. The EDL did not openly celebrate the attack—not officially at any rate—instead it viewed it as a threat to the movement's claim to victimhood; it therefore had to discredit Islam and Muslims in order to retain its simplified equivalential collective identity as 'victim(s)'.

6.3 “Nobody cares about our problems”: Making Sense of Dislocation and Demands

In Chapter Four it was shown how the nine different narrators all held different demands; whilst these demands could be categorised into broad themes with some commonality, they remained particular to each narrator. What made them equivalent was that all of the narrators felt that their specific demands had been ignored by the authorities who they held responsible for fulfilling them. Whilst speaking to the narrators I had often been struck by their anger towards government and the 'establishment', an anger that sometimes overshadowed their anger towards Muslims. I was also struck by the fact that in most cases, once the initial barriers had been broken down between myself and the narrators, an element of vulnerability often crept into our conversations. Whilst demonstration days were often a 'hodge podge' of violence, shouting and self righteousness, when we were alone and discussing personal circumstances my narrators often expressed a degree of uncertainty and often felt persecuted by the system.

The EDL as a movement was, from the very outset, closely associated with 'victims'. As was noted in Chapter Four, the dislocatory event that provided the space for the EDL discourse to emerge was the victimisation of British service personnel by Islamic extremists in Luton and the way in which the narrators explained their unfulfilled demands often made reference to their being victims of government disinterest and the authorities' prioritisation of other communities. These claims of victimisation were never centred on an explicit "I am a victim" narrative but were instead couched in the language of "we are victims", always making an appeal to group victimhood and often in opposition

to ‘others’ who were perceived to have received better or preferential treatment. Busher has noted that “EDL activism entailed becoming part of a community that was saturated with tales of victimhood and heroism relating to EDL issues” (Busher, 2016, loc2503) and whilst this is certainly true, I will argue here that ‘victim(s)’ as an empty signifier emerged at the earliest stages of the EDL’s conception and was the driving force behind the movement by simultaneously enabling equivalence between the differential unfulfilled demands and providing a way of understanding the dislocatory event.

Whilst narrators were not usually willing to use the term victim to describe themselves, they did discuss collective victimhood and were willing to position themselves as part of a group of victims. Fiona perhaps came closest to identifying herself as a victim, with her constant struggles against the local authorities (see Chapter Four). She used the term victimised twice to refer to herself, once when she told me about her problems with her son’s school:

yeah, it is bad and I just try not to let it get me down, I have to keep up for him [her child] but I know that they are treating me differently to other parents, the ones who am immigrants. They victimise me because I’m white, I’m a single mother who they think am scum (Fiona, Interview 2).

She also described her problems with the landlord and local authority as “*just taking the mick, they walk all over me... they victimise me*” (Fiona, Interview 3). It was difficult to discern if she had this sense of victimisation prior to or after joining the EDL, because when narrators spoke about past issues they could not separate out their current feelings and vocabulary with their feelings and vocabulary at an earlier temporal point; indeed we all have this problem in differentiating between past and present thoughts. Whilst Harry made concrete complaints about his treatment when he was made redundant, he never identified himself as a victim, however when discussing his time in the EDL, this victim identity suddenly appeared. When I asked him about an EDL article that used the word victim he was quite clear:

we are victims and yeah we stick up for those who are [victims], that, that’s what we keep trying to say to people. We are the people who nobody cares about you see. Nobody cares about our problems, no one. That’s why the EDL is so important to me, it’s the only way people will listen to us... I

just daint know how many people like me there was you know, fed up of it all. You get to see how many people we stick up for, like the kids who are victims of these Muslim peado gangs, nobody did anything about it, everyone was too scared of political correctness to act it was only us who went and said stuff about it (Harry, Interview 3).

Harry's response was quite typical amongst my narrators in that it linked their particular problems and demands to other particular problems and demands. It was common for narrators to say, as Ian did, that "*there are loads of us, all sick of being treated like shit*" (Ian, Interview 1). There was thus a belief that they shared similar problems to others and also, that they could, by being part of the EDL not just address their own demands but also fight for 'real' victims. Adam explained that he was:

fed up of Muslims being treated like victims by the left and government... I mean they aren't even part of this country, it's our own people the government [pause], the parliament whoever should be worried about... It is them who are the real victims not these fucking Muslims who everyone panders about to (Adam, Interview 3).

We see here the zero sum nature of 'victim(s)' as an empty signifier within the EDL discourse; Muslims cannot be seen as victims in any sense, instead the 'true' 'victims' are "*our own people*". This suggests that 'victim(s)' provides an identity that the narrators' desire, but it is only meaningful if 'we' are seen as victims and not the 'other', who must be a perpetrator and thus be responsible for our victimhood. We can therefore see how the empty signifier "represents the pure and perfect but impossible identity of the community, and defines an antagonistic boundary defining their limits – i.e., excluding the fundamentally different "other" (Glasze, 2007, p.662).

'Victim(s)' is thus acting as an equivalential mechanism simplifying the different demands, because all unfulfilled demands are seen as part of a wider victimisation thus providing an antagonistic frontier in which 'we' as 'victims' are united against 'them' who are responsible for our victimhood. Eve also positioned her individual story into a wider framework of 'victims'. She had explained to me that her brother had been badly treated by the police (see Chapter Four) and when I asked her how she saw her brother's position she explained that:

Eve: They (the police) just didn't care about him, if he had been beat up by whites then maybe they would have done something, but because he was a victim of Asian attacks they didn't care

Me: Do you see him as a victim?

Eve: Yes, yeah of course

Me: A victim of who?

Eve: Of all of it, the police the Asians. But he was badly treated, they put him in hospital and then they [the police] didn't want to know. He was the victim, not them, not them lot... and it's not just us, I've spoken to people on demos and it happens all the time like. It aint just my brother there are lots of us who are treated like this

Me: What, treated badly by the police?

Eve: By everyone, treated bad by them all, council, police the lot. Second class citizens (Eve, Interview 2).

Eve's particular demand thus becomes part of a wider equivalential struggle between "*lots of us*" who are in opposition to "*them all*" who are responsible for this victimisation. We can therefore argue that 'victim(s)' operates to simplify the differential demands and divide the social-scape. This allows 'victim(s)' to represent more than just a particular demand and instead allows it to become a universal representation of the struggle. An EDL article from December 2011 is thus typical of this logic of equivalence represented through the empty signifier of 'victim(s)' when it discusses an attack on a white British female named Rhea Page by a "*gang of girls...who were Muslim*" (EDL Article, 16th December, 2011). The article begins with a complaint about the light, non custodial sentences that the attackers received "*despite their repeatedly calling their victim a "white slag" and "white bitch"*".

By utilising 'victim(s)' as an empty signifier, however, the article quickly universalises this particular isolated incident and its single 'victim' into a fully simplified antagonistic struggle of 'us' and 'them', as 'victim(s)' is used to represent a myriad of different complaints regarding access to justice, freedom of speech and the fear of Islamist extremists. The article explains that "*The EDL believe this to be a clear example of a two tier system*" that results in "*British Muslims...[being] treated with far greater leniency*". The article then goes on to

assert the victimhood of the EDL and “*the white working class*” who are suffering at the hands of government policy that is:

harassing and victimising political opponents, and the continued misuse of the law to clamp down on freedom of speech when it threatens to reveal uncomfortable truths about the government’s failure to address the problems of Islamic extremism (EDL Article, 16th December, 2011).

We see here how the government is being positioned as both an oppressor who is “*victimising*” the EDL and those who they seek to represent but also as a weak institution that is allowing Islamic extremism to continue. Yet we are never really informed how this victimisation is occurring or how it is linked to this particular isolated criminal attack on Rhea Page, it is simply enough to use the words ‘victim’ and ‘victimise’ in order to represent a struggle over a variety of issues. This demonstrates how the empty signifier, even though it has little intrinsic meaning, can unite disparate demands, because as Laclau states “the empty signifier can operate as a point of identification only because it represents an equivalential chain” (2007, p.162).

In addition to constructing unfulfilled demands as equivalent the empty signifier also became a way of understanding the dislocatory event and ordering the new EDL discourse that emerged to explain this event. Thus the event in Luton in 2009 which provided the spark for the EDL’s emergence as a populist movement impacted the role that ‘victim(s)’ would play within EDL understandings of themselves and others subsequently, especially the way in which ‘defending’ ‘victim(s)’ became central to the EDL discourse and identity.

In ‘Billy Blake’s’ insider account of the early years of the English Defence League Blake highlights the shock that many ordinary people (subsequent members of the EDL) felt about the abuse suffered by British soldiers during their homecoming parade. Blake notes that the ordinary people, the “*English working class*”, felt that “*their Armed Forces, unable to fight back, had been insulted on [the] streets they considered their own. If the Army couldn’t defend themselves, they would have to do it for them*” (2011, p.1). We thus see how the concept of ‘defence’, linked to perceived victimization of British troops, was the initial incident that led to the emergence of the EDL and ‘defence’ would continue to play a key role within the EDL discourse, but always attached to and understood within the context of ‘victim(s)’ who needed defending from

dangerous ‘others’. Indeed, even the construction of the English Working Class was ordered via a concept of their ‘victimhood’.

Even after several years, the image of the abused British soldiers in Luton still sparked anger from the narrators, but also led to parallels being drawn. Chris explained, in a similar fashion to Blake, that *“for normal blokes it was a nightmare to see soldiers being screamed at and given grief, my mate is in the army...I remember picking up the paper and just thinking “Christ” that’s bad”* (Chris, Interview 2). Chris went on to say that *“it was the tip of the iceberg wasn’t it? The government has been letting these Muslims get away with stuff, I mean since then [Luton, 2009] look at what’s happened, they [Muslims] rape kids, hate this country. It’s all the same really and they [the government] let it go on because they don’t give a toss about me or you”* (Chris, Interview 2). Adam, a former soldier, had a similar opinion, *“What they did to the lads in Luton was no different to what they do to normal people up and down the country, if you don’t believe in Islam they scream at you, they hate you”* (Adam, Interview 3). We can therefore see how the initial dislocatory event was drawn on by narrators and linked to subsequent events to provide an equivalence and also an explanatory framework, the soldiers were ‘victim(s)’ but so too were ‘ordinary people’.

The events in Luton, as has been argued in Chapter Four, served to dislocate pre-existing discursive understandings of the Military, police and government and further enhanced the perceived ‘threat’ of the Muslim ‘other’; we can thus argue that, in Gramscian terms, the events in Luton constituted an ‘organic crisis’. An organic crisis can be defined “as a crisis of hegemony, in which the people cease to believe the words of the national leaders, and begin to abandon the traditional parties” (Bates, 1975, p.364); such a crisis emerges when there is a perceived “failure of the ruling class” (Bates, 1975, p.364). Such a crisis, we can suggest, meant that new ways of understanding came into effect and, for the EDL’s discourse; this new way of understanding was to see ‘victim(s)’ who needed defending. Not only did ‘victim(s)’ as an empty signifier unify different demands it also precipitated a new explanatory framework for understanding ‘the people’s’ struggle against government and Muslims. This new framework positioned ‘victim(s)’ in need of ‘defence’ against ‘perpetrators’ who were responsible. This concern with ‘victim(s)’ was central to the EDL’s discourse and enabled a language of ‘defence’ that was a key part of the EDL identity.

6.4 “We stick up for these Victims”: The people as ‘Victims’

We can now see how ‘Victim(s)’ as an empty signifier represented heterogeneous unfulfilled demands and provided a way of understanding and linking the dislocatory event in Luton in 2009 both with these demands and with other events. As the EDL became a national movement and sought to construct itself in opposition to ‘others’ the empty signifier further represented the movement and ‘the people’; just as the initial need to ‘defend’ British soldiers elicited collective action so did other ‘victim(s)’ who were seen as being victimised specifically by the establishment and Muslims. The EDL’s discourse incorporated many separate and particular ‘victims’ who were universalised and constructed as being representative of ‘the people’ and their struggle as a whole.

‘Victim(s)’ as an empty signifier not only allowed for the representation of this antagonistic struggle it also allowed for a plurality of different subject positions to be incorporated within the EDL identity. At its height the EDL attracted dedicated support from an ‘LGBT’ division, a female ‘Angels’ division, a ‘Jewish’ division and a ‘Sikh’ division; whilst these were never the majority of supporters, they none the less marched alongside local divisions who contained various other groups from some football ‘casuals’, local friends and various counter ‘Jihadi’ sub groups. In their study of the campaign against the building of Manchester Airport’s Second Runway, Griggs and Howarth argue that a lack of an effective empty signifier to unite two very different groups who were both campaigning against the building of the Second Runway, namely, local middle class opposition (‘the Volvos’) and committed environmental activists (‘the Vegans’) led to the failure of the anti-runway campaigners. As the authors note:

local residents and the eco-warriors were unable to construct an empty signifier around which the distinct identities and demands of the two groups of activists could unite. Opposition was thus weak, carrying no positive identification with which to articulate a collective will (Griggs and Howarth in Howarth et al, 2000, p.65).

That the EDL was able to find space within its identity for special interest groups was because of its focus on and concern with ‘victims(s)’ of government, Islamic Extremism (but effectively ‘Muslims’ in general), police

and left wingers. If you subscribed to a victim subject position then the EDL were both willing to incorporate this position into their discourse and also to provide a framework of understanding due to its populist simplification of the social-scape that allowed blame to be apportioned to the perpetrators. That ‘victim(s)’ was a subject position that people were willing to identify with should not be surprising because in contemporary Western culture the ‘victim’ holds “immense power” (Enns, 2012, p.5) as we have seen above and the EDL’s discourse was a product of the, historically left liberal and progressive, concern for the victim. As Enns has noted, within contemporary progressive discourses it was “decided that the rights of victims and the desire to empower them should take precedence over all other moral and political considerations” (Enns, 2012, p.5) and it is therefore unsurprising that the EDL, emerging as it did to ‘defend’ British soldiers from abuse and made up of citizens who felt aggrieved, co-opted the powerful and ever present language and sentiments of victimhood.

The ‘working class’ was a specific identity that the EDL felt that it had a duty to ‘defend’ and this emerges early in Blake’s insider account of the EDL with his presentation of the ‘English working class’, who are, according to Blake, “*now second class citizens in our own land which our ancestors have slaved, fought and died for. We have been villainized, dumbed down, depoliticised and excluded from the democratic process*” (Blake, 2011, p.2). Indeed, throughout the book the working class is primarily portrayed as a mass of victims: victims of failed multiculturalism, victims of a radical left establishment and, more recently, victims of a radical Islam that the left establishment is seen as allowing, even embracing. This account of Blake’s bore striking similarities to my narrators’ demands and the language in which they used to describe their struggles. Terms such as “*failed multi-culturalism*” (Adam, Bill and David), “*second class citizens*” (Adam, Chris, David, Bill, Harry and Fiona) and “*the government doesn’t care about us*” (David, Chris, Bill and Fiona and Eve) were terms that were regularly used when discussing their initial demands.

The EDL represented the working class as victims of an unfair system in terms of both their access to governmental support and justice and also their actual safety as a group. The EDL would regularly highlight perceived injustices and then make populist generalisations, for example arguing in an article about crime that:

crimes perpetrated by 'sensitive minorities' (particularly British Muslims) are treated with far greater leniency than they would be if committed by a member of the majority population – especially if that person happens to be a member of the white working class (EDL Website, 16th December, 2011).

Because of this perceived injustice, the EDL sought to represent working class 'victim(s)' who were constructed as representative of the suffering of ordinary people as a whole. One of the most illuminating and tragic instances of this was the EDL's 'justice for Charlene Downes' campaign that was run by the movement in the summer of 2010. Charlene Downes was a fourteen-year-old girl who went missing in Blackpool in 2003. The case was originally classed as a missing persons investigation but, in 2005, Lincolnshire police reclassified it as a murder (Bindel, 30th May 2008 in *Guardian Newspaper*), and linked it to the longstanding sexual abuse of young girls connected to local takeaway shops which were owned by immigrants. In his book on his involvement with the EDL Blake gleefully sees this case as a cause célèbre of the EDL, and suggests that, before the creation of the EDL, "*white working class people like the Downes had no one to support them and didn't have the resources to stick up for themselves*" (Blake, 2011, p.126). This is the EDL's working class, the EDL's ideal victim, vulnerable, helpless and suffering.

The EDL not only sought to represent such 'victim(s)' it also provided advice on its website for "*working parents*", for example, an article published in January 2011 which was entitled "*Keep Your Children Safe*" which informed parents that "*UK courts have convicted a disconcertingly large number of predominantly Muslim gangs of abusing non-Muslim girls. High profile cases have involved gangs from Rochdale, Derby and Telford*". Having grabbed the attention of the reader the article provides a graphic account of:

A recent case in Oxford [which] uncovered behaviour so sickening that it is almost unbearable to read about. Seven Muslim men identified girls for abuse, based on their vulnerable backgrounds, and then groomed them until they were under total control. They then offered them around or sold them to associates of the gang for sex. The BBC stated that victims 'were tied up, burnt, suffocated, beaten and urinated upon, and would return to Oxford bleeding, injured and carrying sexually-transmitted infections'.

Judge Peter Rook, sentencing stated that the ‘depravity was extreme’ (EDL Website, 24th January 2013).

After this account the article argues, using a recent press report as evidence, that there is “*a link between Islamism and the grooming rings*”; having firmly established the ‘victims’ and ‘perpetrators’ the article provides advice to parents about how to protect children, telling parents how do “*you reduce the risk your children face from these bigoted and perverted gangs? You can help protect your family by adopting these simple principles to keep them ‘SAFE’*” (EDL Website, 24th January, 2013). The article then provides detailed advice on how to prevent attacks against children, the EDL no doubt felt the need to provide this advice, not only to further raise awareness of the danger of ‘Muslims’ but also because their discourse constructs the government and police as unable and unwilling to help ordinary people, especially the ‘working class’. I discussed the Charlene Downes case and EDL’s advice with my narrators and found that they were highly supportive of the EDL campaign, largely convinced that Muslims were more likely to abuse young girls than ‘non Muslims’ were and believed that the EDL was more interested in these crimes and victims than the authorities. Eve was, as usual, highly critical of the police:

Eve: If Muslim kids were victims of white rapists then they would do something about it but ‘cus its white girls who live on white estates, poor kids, who are victims and because the paedophiles that do it go to Mosques and pretend to be victims of racism then the police leave them and let them rape little girls. I mean how sick are they?

Me: Yes I know, the grooming gangs you mean?

Eve: Yeah, of course they [grooming gangs] are sick but it’s their religion that says to them they can rape little girls, but our police, the social workers they are the sickest ones. Letting it happen, being too scared to offend these Muslim paedophiles, [pauses]... It just makes me so angry... They just don’t care about the victims, about their families(Eve, Interview 2).

Fiona also expressed sympathy with the victims but also told me that “*the EDL is getting the message out there, it’s not the government fighting these grooming gangs it’s us, it’s the EDL... We care about them because it could be my kids who become victims*” (Fiona, Interview 3). She also tolde me that she had printed out similar advice provided by the EDL and shown it to her friends and

family because “*the police don’t try and help protect my kids, we have to look out for ourselves, they [the police] don’t offer me free advice like the admins [writers, organisers of the EDL website] on the [EDL] Website do*” (Fiona, Interview 3). There was thus this equivalence drawn between the ‘victims’ and EDL members and supporters, all were constructed as ‘ordinary people’ and all were equivalent because, according to Gary, “*we could be the next victims of Muslims, of their paedophiles or terrorists or a racist Islamic gang who don’t like Whites and attack me...That’s why we stick up for these victims*” (Gary, Interview 2).

In 2014 a ‘report’ entitled ‘*Easy Meat: Inside the World of Muslim Rape Gangs, Part II*’ was released by a group called ‘Law and freedom Foundation’ which is a shady ‘counter Jihad’ group that seems to have been formed to release a series of reports and a book about the ‘grooming scandal’. As of 2016 the Foundation has a very basic website and my research into the foundation suggests that it is run by a Bristol based solicitor named Gavin Boby who was previously self-styled as the ‘Mosquebuster’ because of the success of his free legal advice to communities who were attempting to challenge the building of new Mosques in their areas.

The release of the ‘report’ gave the EDL another chance to revisit child abuse in the context of white ‘victim(s)’ and ‘Muslim perpetrators’ and also to congratulate itself on the EDL’s ‘impact’:

In the context of seemingly never-ending trials of Muslim rape gangs in this country this report also has a special urgency but it is not just a horror story of murder, rape, abuse, neglect and corruption. There is good news too. For example, the rise of the English Defence League appears to have spurred on the forces in this country to take action. Can it be merely a coincidence that after the advent of the EDL convictions increased more than 10 fold? (Appendix 2: Grooming Gang Chronology) (EDL Website, 26th March 2014).

However, whilst the EDL may congratulate itself on being responsible for forcing the authorities to action, it is also necessary to maintain the struggle and the identity of victimhood. If the EDL were ever to declare victory then that would, of course, throw the ‘victim(s)’ identity into question. The report therefore ends by continuing the simplified ‘us’ and ‘them’, ‘victim(s)’ and ‘perpetrator(s)’ equivalence and antagonism:

Our enemies and the mainstream media may try to analyse this report into irrelevance but they will not have any facts to do so. So it is likely they will just ignore it. Of course, the English Defence League will not ignore it. Our task of fighting back against the Sharia-pushers is easier now that we have the documentation and analysis available in this one report (EDL Website, 26th March 2014).

The title ‘Easy Meat’ is of course highly meaning laden and reflects the construction of ‘Muslim’ men as dangerous and predatory and a threat to non-Muslim ‘victims’. In the comments section of the article an admin had added further information, describing:

the sickening treatment of young whites and non Muslims, at the hands of these sick Islamic peados. What happens to these victims is appalling, the EDL will not stop until the perpetrators are hounded into the ground and Islam ceases to abuse our children. No Surrender (EDL Website, Comments Section, posted 27th March 2014).

The EDL was, in keeping with its populist logic of equivalence, also keen to draw in other communities who could be portrayed as victims and thus incorporated into the ‘struggle’. The EDL Sikh division regularly sought to recruit Sikhs and also to portray Sikhs as continuing victims of Muslims. Accompanied by a picture of an Indian Sikh standing proud in medieval dress with the cross of St. George, wielding a raised sword in his outstretched arm and wearing a turban, an article “*Seeking Slough Sikhs*” portrayed the Sikh community as victims of “*the recent episode of Muslim expansionism that has been visited upon the city in the form of approval by the local council of the building of yet another unregulated mosque and a gender-based Islamic school*” (EDL Website, 24th January, 2014). The article also returned to a familiar EDL narrative by explaining, at length and without any evidence, how Sikh girls were ‘victims’ of Muslim paedophile gangs. The article invited Sikhs to join the EDL in order to combat “*Muslim Crimes*” and explained that:

It has come to light that Muslim pedophile [sic] gangs are targeting Sikh girls for sexual exploitation and forced conversion... Of the 50 worst cases, every single one involved Muslim men. Up and down the country Sikh girls are targeted for sex grooming by Muslim gangs because of the high value the Sikh community places on sexual purity. Many grooming victims are afraid to report crimes to the authorities or even their own families for fear

of being ostracised or shamed. The desire by victims and victim's families to preserve their honour and dignity results in a drastic under-reporting of these crimes(EDL Website, 24th January 2014).

We can here see how the Sikh community are drawn into the narrative as 'victims' of Muslims and the EDL portray themselves as the only way to protect 'victims' against this 'other'. An added comment by 'admin' below this article invited "*Slough Sikhs*" to "*join us and protect your community*" and assured them that "*The EDL stand behind Sikh victims in their fight against Islamic aggression*" (EDL website, Comments Section, 24th January 2014). What is also interesting is that the young females are labelled victims and are portrayed as helpless, but the Sikh community as a whole is actually portrayed as a collective victim who can exercise agency. Such a narrative was also constructed by the EDL's LGBT division. The LGBT division was a small but vocal and very noticeable group within the EDL; as one would expect, the LGBT message was often used as a rather blunt instrument with which to attack elements of the Qur'an from a progressive sexual liberty perspective, however, this is only half of the story. At an EDL demonstration in Newcastle on 25 May 2013, Tommy English, who was then the leader of the EDL LGBT Division made a speech in which he expressed his concerns that:

LGBT people have been driven out of East London, twenty years ago there was almost twenty gay bars there, now there are only three. The media and the far left have been complicit in the ethnic cleansing of East London. Which is why the Muslims have declared East London as a gay free zone (Field Diary, Newcastle, 25th May 2013).

This statement seeks to draw the gay community into the EDL's narrative of victimization. LGBT people are—like the working class—seen as victims who are persecuted by a chain of linked oppressors. The message may appear confusing because 'ethnic cleansing' is a peculiar phrase to use when referring to the perceived oppression of a sexual minority and the fact that the left is seen as to blame will strike most as a counter-intuitive accusation. However, within the EDL discourse, 'the left' should not be understood as indicating a political position per se, rather it is as a signifier of oppression of the EDL's victims.

Thus, when objections were raised over a visit to Britain by American anti-Muslim critics Pamela Geller and Robert Spencer, readers of the EDL's article entitled "*How the People of Britain Are Being Lied To*" were told that, '*for nearly 50 years, the political left have been subtly twisting the facts and the*

truth ... The left can't and won't tell you the truth, because to do so would destroy their efforts to implement their hidden agenda" (EDL Website, 25th June 2013). Thus the 'left' are seen as oppressors of ordinary people; as Chris told me, the EDL were *"all about standing up for the ordinary people, the left don't care about working blokes like me or the families of us, they would rather stick up for Muslim terrorists. They don't care about the ordinary victims of terror attacks like Lee Rigby or like London, they just care about the Muslim community... They have picked their side and I've picked my side"* (Chris, Interview 3).

Chris's mention of Lee Rigby is important because the EDL, emerging as it did to protect British soldiers, was again galvanized after the attack on Rigby. For several months after Rigby's savage murder EDL meetings and demonstrations received a spike in attendance and Rigby became a symbolic 'victim' figure for the EDL as a movement; despite Rigby's family and his regiment publically condemning the use of Rigby's death for such means grassroots EDL members were always keen to discuss Rigby and his 'victim' status at demonstrations. There was a belief, as Gary insisted, that *"Only the EDL care about the real reasons behind Lee Rigby's death"* (Gary, Interview 1) and a sense, especially during demonstrations in which Rigby was mentioned, that the EDL felt that it had ownership over his representation.

The attention to the military however, was not in itself new and the EDL had, throughout its discourse, drawn attention to the British soldier as 'victim(s)' who represented the ordinary people of this country. Adam explained the importance to him of the EDL's concern with soldiers; again this was couched in the language of 'victim' with 'the left' portrayed as oppressor. It was a subject that Adam had, quite clearly, put a great deal of thought into and he himself had asked me if we could discuss it in order to see if I thought his argument a credible one:

It's sad I think, really shit, the way that soldiers are ignored and not cared about. The left are always moaning about our lads doing bad things over in Iraq or Afghan they am always saying there are poor people over there who am victims of the British Army. But seriously, the shit that we go through when we are deployed in these places, the left don't care about that. But then they stick up for Muslim terrorists and talk about Muslim

rights and Muslims being victims of abuse, you know, Islamophobia, but when they chop his [Lee Rigby's] fucking head off they are silent. I mean on the streets of this country and we [the EDL] want to have a parade to remember him and those fuckers from UAF are going to come and shout at us, they don't shout at the Muslims who cut his head off in public, [pause] no they come shout at us. It's the white working class in this country who become soldiers and the left hate us, they only like immigrants that's why EDL is important, [pause] we stick up for ourselves (Adam, Interview 2).

We see how Adam is engaged in this zero sum struggle over the representation of victimhood; he is effectively accusing the left of focusing on the 'wrong' victims whilst asserting that the EDL are both focusing on the right victims and are also able to "stick up for ourselves". We see how Adam perceives Rigby's death as representative of the struggle over victims and the left is positioned as being on the other side of the antagonistic frontier that separates 'victim(s)' and 'perpetrator(s)'. Rigby and the military more generally are portrayed as linked to the working class who the 'left' are opposed to. The EDL was, as we have seen, inextricably linked to soldiers from the very beginning and whilst pride at the deeds of soldiers was acknowledged, the soldier as 'victim' was ever present. From the representation of the Luton homecoming parade, to Rigby and also to providing information on its website about the suffering of soldiers the EDL's victim discourse represented soldiers as victims. An article on PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) in soldiers highlights this victim status but also demonstrates how the 'other' was portrayed as responsible:

When the Royal Anglians had their home-coming parade through Luton back in 2009, they were abused, spat upon and insulted by Muslims from Islam4UK... Little did they realise that some of those returning men, were inflicted with a serious injury... Succeeding governments... have done almost nothing to help returning service personnel suffering from this illness... They are happy to send our lads off to fight and to die but refuse to help them when they are injured. PTSD is just as much an injury as losing an arm or leg, or being shot. It's an injury of the mind rather than of the body. Yet our government and the M.O.D continue ignore [sic] these men and women and the suffering they go through (EDL Website, 8th December, 2011).

That such ‘victim’ status can be applied to numerous differing subject positions is understandable when we consider the cultural status of the victim, especially within contemporary mass media. As Govier notes, “a look at any newspaper will show much attention to victims and their rights and needs” (2015, p.XI) and because of this almost all groups are familiar with the concept of ‘victim status’ and thus it has both widespread recognition coupled with an inherent vagueness. This vagueness exists because “it is not a simple matter of fact that a person is a victim (Govier, 2015, p.37)” and thus victimhood requires “moral presumptions about responsibility, innocence and virtue, harm, suffering, vulnerability, and passivity” (Govier, 2015, p.37) that have been continuously constructed and reconstructed depending upon which discourse is identifying victims; therefore ‘victim’ is a deeply contested floating term. However, coupled with a populist discourse that simplifies the social-scape via antagonism and equivalence ‘victim(s)’ actually becomes simplified, and by losing its complexity it is able to represent and make equivalent ‘us’ who stand in opposition to the ‘perpetrators’.

What we can draw from this use of ‘victim(s)’ as an empty signifier is that the working class, LGBT community, Sikhs and the military were not themselves seen as an historical subject per se, but were different subject positions that were united through the empty signifier of ‘victim(s)’, and it is victims who take the place as a subject position that is seen as an historical agent who must struggle against the oppressors.

6.5 “We stand Together to Defend England”: England as both ‘Victim’ and ‘Safe Space’

England occupied a central yet ambivalent place within the EDL discourse and was seen as both an identity that was under threat but also as a safe space, a place to retreat to from the perceived hostilities and oppression of the contemporary world. Thus England was both an imagined community (see Anderson, 1983) and also an identity that was being blocked by the ‘others’ and which needed defending. There was therefore a simultaneous positioning of ‘England’ within the EDL discourse – it was at once ideal but also threatened, a safe space yet also a victim.

One of the most interesting ways that England was positioned was as in contrast to Britain. The EDL often used the term Britain and one could be forgiven for

thinking that the terms ‘Britain’ and ‘England’ were used interchangeably. However, when I spoke to my narrators, seven of whom described themselves as English, there was a clear disconnect between ‘England’ and ‘Britain’. Garry summarised the difference between ‘England’ and ‘British’ in a way that suggested that England felt ‘safe’ whereas Britain did not. He told me that:

I don't like the idea of being British that much to be honest, British don't mean that much. You just don't get any English Muslims, but you get British Muslims, not English Muslims...Anyone can become British, and that's the problem but it's not like just anyone can become English.... I am English but they don't like you being English you see, because they want us, they try and make us be multicultural British (Garry, Interview 1).

For Garry there appeared to be a sense of security in being English because it is an exclusive identity rather than an inclusive identity. The point he made about there being ‘British’ but not ‘English’ Muslims suggests that, on an identitarian level, one could retreat into an English identity instead of sharing ‘Britishness’ with a dangerous other. However, like almost all other important signifiers within the EDL’s discourse there exists a threat against being English, England becomes positioned by the empty signifier of ‘victim(s)’ and thus for Garry his English identity is threatened by ‘them’ who “*try and make us be multicultural British*”. Garry was not clear who exactly ‘they’ were, however, there was clearly a belief that English identity was somehow being blocked. Adam also expressed ambiguity when he told me that “*I was in the British army, but I am English really*” (Adam, interview 1).

On the whole however, England seemed to be an ideal identity that was perceived to be under threat by political correctness and the left, whilst Britain seemed to be a more distant concept. That the narrators were seeking to retreat from Britain should not be surprising given the change in concepts of national identity in recent decades; as Ghose notes:

Since the 1990s, Britishness has increasingly come to denote a more inclusive national identity in contrast to Englishness, which has historically been used to assert a hegemonic...domestic identity in imperial and post-second world war constructions of national identity (in MacPhee and Poddar, 2007, p.121).

England was certainly heavily present at demonstration days, with local groups and special interest groups waving England flags as well as their own flags.

Thus ‘England’ was an identity that could be relied upon to bring the group together in opposition to external threats that were seen as oppressing this ‘English’ identity. As Ian, using his usual racist language explained, *“those left wingers, and the pakis they hate us waving England flags because they want to destroy England but we are fucking proud to be English”* (Ian, Interview 2). There was thus this sense of pride over an identity that was being threatened, an identity that needed defending. England as an imagined space could always be relied upon to bring people together, to make equivalent the different groups because fundamentally England is not “attached to a particular place, but rather to imaginative identifications – an England that could always be recreated” (Young, 2008, p.231).

England was also deeply connected to the EDL’s preconditions of emergence, where unfulfilled demands and abused soldiers allowed ‘victim(s)’ to become the empty signifier of the discourse. England was seen as a place of victimhood, of unfulfilled demands, of neglect and of unwanted change. This narrative of England being threatened could be constructed in rather interesting ways, as an EDL article entitled *“England Reintroduces Apartheid”* makes clear. In the article the reader is introduced to Nelson Mandela and Apartheid is explained, the article tells readers in detail that:

Last month, Universities UK (UUK), the body representing the leadership of UK universities, published guidance on external speakers saying that the segregation of the sexes at universities is not discriminatory as long as “both men and women are being treated equally, as they are both being segregated in the same way.” Supported by the National Union of Students, it goes on to say that: “Concerns to accommodate the wishes or beliefs of those opposed to segregation should not result in a religious group being prevented from having a debate in accordance with its belief system” (EDL Website, 16th December 2013).

The article goes on to explain how such gender segregation was an attack on English values. Whilst English values were not explicitly explained, it was made clear that *“in the name of “the freedom of speech” of people who hold a “genuinely-held religious belief”, England is reintroducing apartheid”* (EDL Website, 16th December 2013). The fact that ‘freedom of speech’ is attacked is somewhat paradoxical because the EDL regularly attack government for attempting to prevent freedom of speech. However, a look at the EDL’s Mission statement does somewhat clear up this paradox, in it the EDL *“calls upon the*

Government to repeal legislation that prevents effective freedom of speech, for freedom of speech is essential if the human rights abuses that sometimes manifest themselves around Islam are to be stopped” (EDL Mission Statement). It would thus appear that, for the EDL, freedom of speech is a tool that can be used against Islam; however, like their conception of England, freedom of speech as an inherent value is a paradoxical issue within the EDL discourse.

We thus see how the EDL constructs England as under threat, or as David says clearly, “*England is a victim of political correctness, the government hates the idea of proud Englishmen, they think we are scum. That’s why we must fight for it*” (David, Interview 3). England is here constructed in the same way as it is in the article above, as a ‘victim’ of the ‘others’ who are challenging English values, although these English values remain implicit, defined by a negative ‘other’ rather than a positive conception. Jackson has also highlighted how the EDL present “all Muslims as incompatible with a true, English identity” (Jackson in Jackson and Feldman, 2011, p.12) and we can suggest that this true English identity is never really explicated by the EDL. Rather England is drawn into a discourse of victimhood and becomes a place that is under threat.

6.6 “We are all Tommy Robinson”: The Leader as ‘Victim’

In November 2012 a group of EDL activists, some wearing facemasks of Tommy Robinson’s face, stood close to Wandsworth Prison protesting against the imprisonment of the EDL leader, Tommy Robinson. Robinson had been remanded in custody for illegally entering the United States of America on a British passport belonging to someone else, an offence for which he was eventually jailed for ten months. Shortly before the ‘We are all Tommy Robinson’ demonstration the EDL had posted a Facebook message to its supporters complaining that:

Tommy Robinson is languishing in Wandsworth prison... Could it be a government conspiracy to silence us? Do they think if they take away our figurehead the ship will sink without its captain? Or is it just the two tier justice system in full swing, riding roughshod over him because the powers that be are

(1) Terrified in the knowledge that he is speaking what others are thinking, but dare not say...

(3) Just plain old discrimination of Tommy for leading a movement that has shaken this country's lily livered ruling elite over the last three years (EDL Facebook Post 5th November 2012).

We here see Robinson constructed as a 'victim'; as Gary explained to me during an interview *"that guy [Robinson] suffered so much as leader because he stood up for the right people, the victims of Muslim grooming gangs and all that stuff and the government went for him I reckon, because of that"* (Gary, Interview 1). As leader of the EDL Robinson became the movement's most recognisable 'victim'. Once the demonstration had been held outside Wandsworth prison the EDL website reported on events, under the headline, *"We are All Tommy Robinson"*. In a photograph accompanying the original publication, EDL members are dressed in 'free Tommy' t-shirts and are wearing Tommy Robinson face masks. The article stated that *"after over a month in prison, it's no wonder EDL supporters are asking why someone who has dedicated himself to standing up against extremism is being victimized in this way"*; Robinson, it complained, was the victim of *"politically motivated persecution"* (EDL Website, 26th November 2012). We thus see how Robinson becomes an embodiment of the struggle against oppression and the EDL members, in a very real sense, 'become Tommy Robinson'. Despite having committed a serious criminal offence, the EDL's discourse is able to portray Robinson as a victim of persecution. Indeed, one has to question if there would have been any crime that Robinson was convicted of that would not have been reinterpreted as somehow politically motivated within the EDL discourse. His victim status meant that he could not be seen as a perpetrator and the fact that the EDL construct government, police and authority in general as untrustworthy, oppressive perpetrators means that their actions against Robinson are always seen through the 'victim(s)'/perpetrator(s)' binary.

Hence when Robinson was detained at a demonstration by officers from the Metropolitan Police in June 2013, he was again constructed as a 'victim' and as representative of the collective victimhood of the movement and thus another hyperbolic article on the EDL website complained that: *"Tommy Robinson once again became a prisoner of conscience on Saturday, this time for peacefully*

walking while being Tommy Robinson". The arrest was described in terms of an assault against Robinson by a counter demonstrator which was then followed by police persecution. I was explained that *"even with police all around the EDL leaders a man was allowed to step forward and assault one of them. A police chief inspector no less was then on hand to arrest the victims of the assault"* (EDL Online, 1st July 2013).

Viewing Robinson as a victim whilst he leads often violent demonstrations in racially sensitive areas may seem ludicrous to many people, but to those within the EDL discourse it makes perfect sense and Robinson is seen as being 'just like us', therefore he shares victim status with ordinary people. For example, Fiona told me that *"he [Robinson] was always getting arrested, and he never did anything wrong as far as I could see, from what I heard, he was always picked on [laughs], like me really the way the powers that be were always having a pop at him"* (Fiona, Interview 3). Chris saw Robinson as *"like one of the lads...a normal bloke"* (Chris, Interview 1), however, Adam was less impressed with Robinson saying he *"[isn't] serious, he just wants the glory and lots of people are taken in by his crap but he aint serious"* (Adam, interview 2). David also had reservations when it came to Robinson, complaining that Robinson *"thought he was bigger than the movement"* and that he *"is all about himself"* (Davis, Interview 1); however, apart from Adam and David, the other narrators viewed Robinson favourably, even though he chose to leave the EDL, resigning as leader in a hyped up media publicity stunt courtesy of the Quilliam Foundation.

In the press conference organised by the Quilliam Foundation on 8 October 2013, Robinson framed his resignation in terms of his 'victimization'. In a narcissistic twelve-minute statement, in which he used the words *"I"*, *"me"* or *"my"* 147 times, he spoke of his suffering and complained that his association with the movement had affected his personal life, and that the movement no longer represented him. Robinson did not say that his decision to leave was based on the dwindling membership of the movement, suggesting that, for him, the movement still had a strong base of support, especially in the wake of Lee Rigby's murder. He instead complained that his life had been *"chaotic, with all the death threats or violent assaults or arrests"* (DominicGover, International Business Times (online), 8 October 2013). He went on to criticize the

extremism of some individuals who behaved aggressively at demonstrations and, with no hint of irony, complained that:

Muslims think they are offended and they are upset, we are offended by that. It is my face everyone here reports is a racist, it is me that takes the flack for it...I have to go and pick my kids up from school and look at other parents and look at people judging me, everyone judging me(DominicGover, International Business Times (online), 8 October 2013).

Thus Robinson, ever the victim, deployed this narrative in much the same way that the EDL had deployed its narratives against the political establishment, the police and Muslims in previous speeches. For its part, the EDL were relatively muted after Robinson's departure. While a demonstration went ahead in Bradford the weekend after the press conference, the usual channels of communication temporarily broke down. However, one official statement was released on the EDL's website and it expressed the typical narrative of victimhood that has become the EDL's trademark, suggesting that, even without Robinson, 'victim(s)' remained the empty signifier that ordered the discourse. The official EDL statement read:

We are grateful to Tommy and Kev for their hard work and dedication ... We can easily appreciate the pressures and strain their leadership of the EDL has placed upon Tommy and Kev, not just personally, but also on their families and those dear to them. Not many people could have stood firm in the face of death threats, assaults, police intimidation and state interference(EDL Website, 8th October 2013).

Here we see clearly that, while Robinson and his cousin and co-leader Kevin Carroll had left the EDL, victimhood and the empty signifier 'victim(s)' remained as a collectively established and understood reference frame and was the way in which the movement narrated the pair's exit. Indeed, even Robinson himself continued to self construct as a victim; his autobiography, published in 2015, after his release from prison for mortgage fraud was entitled "*Tommy Robinson: Enemy of the State*". Whilst the book contains much of the boorish braggadocio that characterised Robinson's leadership of the EDL, such as when he invites "*Luton and Bedfordshire Probation Service, Scotland Yard and the entire British constabulary [to] kiss my arse*" (Loc 51), it also contains

references to his victimhood, and, more interestingly it is clear that he himself saw how important his ‘victim’ status was for the movement.

Referring to his appearance on the BBC3 programme ‘*Free Speech*’, he notes that “*I knew exactly what was going to happen – that the whole place was going to gang up on me and that I’d come off as the victim – so let’s go*” (Robinson, 2015, LOC 2756). Robinson was clear about the importance of being seen to be the ‘victim’ “*because every normal person watching that at home would be frustrated and angry about the stitch up*” (Robinson, 2015, LOC 2756). This is an interesting media strategy and demonstrates the way in which a discourse that privileges victimhood requires public suffering rather than argumentation or debate, it is clear that for Robinson the purpose was “*to be subject to the abuse...Because it doesn’t just prove the nature of these so-called ‘peace-loving’ lefties and Muslims, it takes ordinary people into a world they don’t know*” (Robinson, 2015, LOC 2756). We thus see how important Robinson’s public suffering was for a movement that was driven by the desire to be a victim that represented the suffering and oppression of ‘ordinary’ people and with Robinson’s departure the movement lost its most visible and willing ‘victim’.

6.7: “We’re the real victims”: The Movement as Victim

Whilst Robinson came to signify the collective victimhood of both the EDL and ordinary people struggling against the system the EDL as a movement was also positioned by the empty signifier of ‘victim(s)’. This self understanding of themselves as a movement that was victimised allowed for some startling narratives of ‘self’ and ‘others’. In essence, the fact that the EDL constructed itself (doubly) as a movement representing ‘victim(s)’ that was also, as a movement itself victimised, allowed it to justify a range of aggressive and anti-social behaviour.

When EDL demonstrators shouted foul mouthed tirades about Allah and Muslims or when activists fought pitched street battles with police and counter demonstrators this was always deemed acceptable and justifiable because the EDL ‘were only sticking up for ourselves’. Thus, by constructing themselves as a movement that was victimised because it challenged the authorities and their perceived complicity with Islamist extremism the EDL constructed itself as fighting on behalf of victims and struggling against oppressors. Therefore, it

was always possible to excuse EDL aggression by virtue of their ‘victim’ status. Such a discourse that is overtly victim centred and driven by the desire to represent victims and present itself as victim is, therefore, particularly insidious and harmful to community cohesion, because:

a concentration on grievances may support and stimulate desires for revenge. The conviction that “our group” qualifies as the more significant victim, perhaps the only victim, in a conflict will block efforts to build understanding and trust...Any sense that “our group” might have acted unjustly or cruelly is likely to be overwhelmed by the conviction that we are, above all, victims of wrongdoing at the hands of you *others* (Govier, 2015, p.59).

Whilst some narrators, such as David, were willing to accept that occasionally some EDL supporters got “*out of hand*” (David, Interview 2), overwhelmingly, disorder and violence were blamed on the ‘others’. This blame ranged from the general “*we are only demonstrating because the government don’t give a toss about us*” (Ian, Interview 1), to the specific “*the UAF are the thugs, not us, we are peacefully exercising our right to demonstrate about the state of this country and the UAF come and start chucking stuff at us... Of course the police don’t stop them, they would rather nick us for defending ourselves*” (Chris, Interview 2), to the way in which the media report on the EDL, “*we are always the baddies, they made us out to be in the wrong because they are scared of us...It’s because we challenge the powers that be that they are scared of us and make us seem like animals and racists when we are just ordinary people*” (Fiona, Interview 2).

There was therefore a complete lack of critical appraisal about EDL members’ actions within the group. Even when blatant offences had been committed the EDL would still seek to delegitimize the outcome by complaining that EDL members were treated more harshly than counter demonstrators or Muslims. There was the all too familiar complaint that there existed a “*disproportionate legal and judicial bias that acts directly against the interests of the native population of this country*” (EDL Website, 10th December 2014) and therefore EDL members were always portrayed as victims of police and government oppression. In a classic example, after the EDL’s Walsall demonstration ended in disorder and mass arrests, those EDL members who were arrested, charged,

and pleaded guilty were described as being victims of “*a spectacular display of the double-standards we have sadly become accustomed to*” (EDL Website, 18th December, 2013). The EDL article went on to ask “*How many violent Islamists were arrested? How many far-left supporters who actually were involved in fighting with police officers [were arrested]?*” (EDL Website, 10th December 2014).

The victim identity was attached to a populist division of the social-scape and meant that the EDL refused to accept justice or the rule of law because they felt that the system penalised them unfairly. Thus, there existed a nihilistic ‘bunker’ mentality in which extreme abuse and violence was seen as acceptable because of the EDL’s victim status, anyone who criticised the EDL, anyone who attempted to intervene was constructed as a cause of their victim status and could therefore be confronted. This mentality sometimes spilled over into my narrators’ personal lives outside of the EDL. Adam explained that his boss at work kept giving him “*shit jobs to do*” and he was convinced that this was because he was in the EDL. When I asked Adam if his boss could know if he was in the EDL he told me that “*I haven’t told him I am involved in EDL, but it has got to be hasn’t it? People always pick on us, he must have found out somehow*” (Field Diary, 20/07/2013). Adam was actually interpreting relations with his boss through the prism of EDL victimhood.

The EDL’s victimhood also actively encouraged violence because ‘victim(s)’ as an empty signifier produced a discourse that constructed the EDL as having to ‘defend’ themselves and others, because of this violence could be considered as justifiable and necessary. As Chris said, “*I’m not violent, I really ain’t and most of us aren’t but if we have to stick up for each other then we will do. It’s all about sticking together... We have to stick together because no one else will help us*” (Chris, Interview 1). Eve explained that as a female she felt vulnerable at EDL demonstrations because of the “*violent left and radical Muslims who try and attack us*” but she praised the EDL men who “*make sure everything is okay, they won’t run away from those extremists. They will fight back, they will beat them harder than they can beat us*” (Eve, Interview 1). Fiona made a similar statement describing the EDL as “*good friendly people who don’t look for trouble but who won’t back down neither*” (Fiona, Interview 2). When I asked Fiona about the violence her answer was in keeping within the EDL narrative: “*I don’t agree with violence, the EDL isn’t violent, I wouldn’t have joined if it were violent. But if we get attacked for standing up for ourselves then we have*

to fight back and I know that there are plenty of fighters in the EDL and that's why the UAF hate us because we will stand up to them, our lads are harder than theirs [laughs]" (Fiona, Interview 2). We can see here how even a narrator who claims to dislike violence has actually normalised violence as an acceptable response in order "*stand up to them*" who are the enemy.

Enns has noted that for victims the identity of victimhood has "acquired a status beyond critique, that it has become a metaphor for "the good"" (2012, p.6) and for the EDL's self portrayal this is certainly true. Discussing the violence at a demonstration, Harry insisted that:

it wasn't our fault, you can't blame us, the counter demonstrators and the cops started it...The media makes it out to be our fault, makes us look like criminals and tells everyone that the cops and UAF are attacked by us, but its, its rubbish, its rubbish. We're the real victims, we just protected ourselves(Harry, interview 2).

There is very little that can be done to attempt to argue with this conviction that 'we' are 'victims'. It is also a mentality that has not appeared to change, whilst the number of EDL supporters and the size of demonstrations may have waxed and waned since 2009, the 'victim' discourse has remained the same. Even in 2016, as this thesis is about to be completed, several of the most recent articles on the current EDL website fit in almost exactly to the ones from 2010-2014 that we have looked at. In response to a demonstration in Coventry in May 2016 two EDL articles appeared. The first berated the police and stated that: "*The West Midlands Police win the award for crass, unprovoked, heavy-handed, disrespect and especially violent actions against the English Defence League during our demonstration in Coventry on 21 May 2016*" (EDL Website, 31st May, 2016). A second article addressed the fact that Swastikas had appeared during the EDL demonstration, something that has happened before when extreme right wing members attend demonstrations. However, the EDL are clear who is to blame, using stock language of victimhood and conspiracy the EDL website rhetorically asked "*Were the swastikas painted by Unite against Fascism or its affiliates?*". The local media also came in for criticism:

The Coventry Telegraph provocatively ignored our words... the words we stand by, the words held high today by men, women and children at our demonstration. Instead they provocatively published anonymous graffiti with the suggestion that the EDL was behind the swastikas and that

swastikas – associated Germany’s Third Reich and anti-semitism ever since – represent our views (EDL Website, 21st May 2016).

We again see how the EDL, even after seven years of protesting, still maintain a bunker mentality in which they feel victimised and because of the centrality of the victim within the EDL’s discourse the movement remains trapped, demanding that others recognise its victimhood and maintaining an antagonistic relationship with those who will not recognise this victim status. Ultimately, the EDL’s populist discourse centred around the empty signifier ‘victim(s)’ has never attained hegemony, those outside of the EDL discourse refuse to recognise their victim status and this, therefore, blocks the EDL from attaining its full identity and this results in further antagonism as the EDL lash out at those who refuse to recognise their victimhood. The EDL has sought to represent a range of different subject positions but ultimately have failed, as the article above notes, to “*represent our views*” and thus their assertion of victimhood becomes just one more unfulfilled demand.

Conclusion

This thesis has sought to provide a theoretical understanding of the English Defence League as a populist social movement. In doing so it has sought to contribute to the literature on the EDL and also, through practical application, to demonstrate the relevance of Ernesto Laclau's theory of populism to contemporary political science. The ethnographic research that was conducted for this thesis has allowed me to gain exposure to the EDL and through a theoretical analysis of the movement's discourse this work has made several interventions into current understandings of the EDL.

In Chapter One it was argued that there were three aspects of the EDL literature that this work sought to challenge; two of these aspects were related to issues of identity and it was argued that the academic literature on the EDL in general under-theorised the issue of identity. The two aspects related to identity that this thesis has challenged were:

- A reductionist class based understanding of the EDL
- A lack of understanding of the process through which the EDL constructs a collective identity

These two problematic aspects of the literature represented a lack of understanding as to the reasons why the EDL became a successful grass roots movement, for such a movement is never inevitable. By reducing the rise of the EDL simply to working class frustrations and marginalisation Garland and Treadwell (2011) failed to acknowledge the fact that the EDL was not simply a sum total of its members identities. Rather the EDL as a collective movement constructed a unique identity; however, there was a general lack of attention within the literature to how this process actually operated.

Studies such as Copsey's had a tendency to see the EDL as a static arena in which "a loose coalition of hardcore football hooligans, far right extremists, and politically unsophisticated white working class youth" (2010, p.5) operated. Whilst these groups certainly did, and continue to, exist within the EDL that is only part of the story. By simplifying the EDL the movement was depoliticised and yet, at the same time, authors such as Copsey acknowledged that it was a "new social movement" (2010, p.5) which suggests, as was argued in Chapter One, a focus on collective identity construction; yet this remained ignored within the literature.

A separate but related aspect that existed within the literature was the assumption:

- That the EDL is a single issue movement that is driven primarily by Islamophobia

Whilst early studies of the movement which suggested this (Copsey 2010, Jackson, 2011) single issue thesis had little time to conduct long term analysis the assumption has continued to be made even in a newly released ethnographic account of the EDL by Pilkington who has asserted that “the EDL is a single-issue anti-Islam movement” (2016, p.3). This single-issue assumption was questioned by Bartlett and Littler who identified the fact that much of the EDL’s vitriol was focused on the government which they suggested was linked to their anti-Islam rhetoric but also a perception that the government was “drowned in political correctness and marred by indefensible double standards” (2011, p.13). Whilst the EDL clearly spends much time and energy attacking Islam and can be usefully defined as Islamophobic (Allen, 2010), it was argued in Chapter One that this was only part of the picture and that the EDL may be more complex than the single-issue thesis allows for.

In order to address these three problematic aspects of the EDL this study utilised Laclau’s conception of populism. The EDL has previously been identified as a populist movement (Bartlett and Littler, 2010, Jackson, 2011) and in Chapter One it was argued that this thesis would also present the EDL as populist. However, this thesis made a point of departure by utilising Laclau’s theory of populism which, it was argued, allowed for a focus on identity construction. In Chapter Two Laclau’s theory was explicated and it was demonstrated how the analytical tools that discourse theory and Laclau’s theory of populism provided allowed this thesis to focus on three specific research aims that were designed to address the three problematic aspects that were identified in Chapter One. These three research aims were:

- 1) Investigate the preconditions that led to the emergence of the EDL as a populist movement
- 2) Examine how the EDL discourse utilised equivalence and antagonism to construct the ‘other’

- 3) (a) Identify the empty signifier that produced equivalence within the EDL identity and (b) identify what impact this empty signifier has on the EDL collective identity

By utilising concepts from Laclau's theory the analysis part of this work focused on addressing the emergence of the EDL (Chapter Four), its populist discourse (Chapter Five) and the way that the movement's identity was based on collective victimhood, with 'victim(s)' acting as an empty signifier (Chapter Six). The empirical data was gained from an eighteen month ethnographic study that included observation at demonstrations and narrative interviews with nine EDL 'narrators'. Whilst this is undeniably a small scale study that does not purport to offer a definitive examination of the EDL and all of its members, it does offer a rich and thick description of the movement and, paired as it is with a theoretical analysis, it has contributed to our understanding of how the movement emerged and through what conditions, the process through which the EDL constructs a collective identity through its antagonistic relationship with numerous 'others' and has also highlighted the role that 'victim(s)' have played, and continue to play, within the movement's discourse.

By investigating the preconditions that led to the emergence of the EDL as a populist movement this thesis has shown how the nine narrators within this study all had heterogeneous demands and that because these demands had gone unfulfilled all of the narrators were experiencing social frustration with the dominant authority. This is vital for understanding the EDL as a populist social movement that was driven by something altogether more complex than thugs simply looking for a fight. Instead it was suggested that the narrators' grievances against the institutional system made them ripe for a movement that sought to 'stand up' against perceived enemies. It was also argued that the tone of the EDL was set by the events in Luton which were constructed as a 'crisis' by the EDL. By actually investigating, in detail, the trigger events in Luton, something that is usually only addressed in passing within the academic literature on the EDL, this work was able to highlight how the EDL's discourse emerged as a consequence of dislocation and unfulfilled demands and has therefore drawn attention to the necessary preconditions for the emergence of the EDL as a populist movement.

By examining how the EDL discourse utilised equivalence and antagonism to construct the 'other' this work moved beyond the single-issue thesis approach to the EDL, suggesting that it actually constructed a range of dangerous 'others'.

These ‘others’ were made equivalent through the EDL discourse, apart from the police, who occupied a complex position within the EDL’s discourse. It was demonstrated that the EDL was able to incorporate a range of different groups and identities into its collective identity by simplifying the social-scape into ‘us’ and ‘them’. Rather than seeing the EDL as simply a homogenous group, as the reductionist class based approaches do, it was highlighted that the EDL sought to include a range of identities into the movement who were united and made equivalent by their antagonism to the ‘other’. Thus, the ‘LGBT’ division, ‘Sikh’ division and ‘Jewish’ division existed within the EDL movement because its populist construction of the social-scape allowed anyone who was not an ‘other’ into the EDL’s ‘us’ camp. This was especially true at demonstrations which were ‘read’ as an antagonistic face off that further strengthened the logic of equivalence and thus the EDL’s collective identity; such an interpretation of demonstrations has not before been attempted.

Finally, this work sought to identify the empty signifier that produced equivalence within the EDL identity and identified what impact it had on the EDL’s collective identity. The role of collective victimhood was investigated and it was argued that the EDL’s collective identity is based around ‘victim(s)’ which acts as an empty signifier. Whilst the EDL regularly talk about ‘victim(s)’, the literature has very little to say about this, indeed Busher (2016) is the only academic author to pay attention to the role that ‘victims’ play within the EDL and he does not examine the concept with sufficient rigour.

This thesis has argued that victimhood is the key signifier of the EDL’s identity and by acknowledging this we can begin to make sense of specific aspects of the EDL’s discourse. This approach examined the EDL identity in its full complexity rather than assuming that the EDL was simply a single-issue movement driven by working class Islamophobia. By highlighting the importance of victimhood and its pervasive effect on the EDL’s identity this work was able to suggest that this was a key factor in the EDL’s violence and belligerence, if a group perceives itself as victims it will self-justify its acts of violence and aggression as ‘defence’. What is more, the fact that the EDL’s victimhood discourse had not achieved hegemony within wider society and was thus rejected by those who were not part of the group caused further antagonism as the EDL struggled against those it saw as ‘blocking’ its identity.

Since 2014, when this study ended the EDL has lost momentum, with falling numbers attending demonstrations, yet it still remains a clear concern to

communities and still presents a policing challenge. As was suggested in Chapter Six, the movement still sees itself as being victimised. It was beyond the scope of this work to analyse the decline of the EDL and its discourse but further research could address this problem with reference to the concepts contained within this thesis. The fact that the EDL rely so heavily on collective victimhood suggests that future incarnations of the movement will also maintain such an identity and thus this work has laid the groundwork for future studies of the role that victim plays in such contentious and antagonistic movements, because as has been made clear in this study, such an identity provides unity to the group but division in our society.

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List of Demonstrations Observed

Location	Date
Manchester	March 2 nd 2013
Birmingham	July 20 th 2013
Newcastle	May 25 th 2013
London	May 27 th 2013
Tower Hamlets	September 7 th 2013
Bradford	October 12 th 2013
Exeter	November 16 th 2013
Grantham	February 22 2014
Batley	August 9 th 2014
Rotherham	September 13 th 2014