

ONE

Introduction

Je ne sais quoi...

This book is based on the conviction that an honest, detailed and contextualised analysis of the English Defence League (EDL) and its supporters can shed light on the return of English nationalism among the working class in the unpredictable and volatile times in which we live. Lately we have witnessed some of the most profound shifts in the history of political economy. Neoliberalism's global economic logic has established itself as the dominant organising principle in our lives. All known alternative modes of socioeconomic organisation have disintegrated and virtually disappeared from everyday practice and the popular imagination. In such a political hiatus neoliberalism has pressed on unhindered, with the deindustrialisation of many areas of Europe and North America, and the rapid industrialisation of China and other parts of the developing world. In many regions of the deindustrialised west we have seen the gap between rich and poor grow to historic proportions in a realigned social structure that can now be legitimately described as a plutocracy (Winlow and Hall, 2013; Dorling, 2014; Therborn, 2014). We have also seen global warming, drought, mass migration and the depletion of many of the natural resources that are vital to the uninterrupted economic growth on which the functioning of the capitalist system and the livelihoods of its subjects depend (Klare, 2008; Heinberg, 2011; Hiscock, 2012).

Our political culture has grown sterile. It no longer appears to be capable of engaging the people in an informed and forthright discussion about root-and-branch changes to the way

we live together. The vast majority of our politicians display a dispiriting lack of will to challenge and overcome the historic problems we face. Most have accepted the transformation of the old modernist social order, with its unequal yet stable and comprehensible structure of entitlements and obligations, into a world of hollow freedoms, insecurity and panoramic dissatisfaction. The new political consensus has been forged in a silent pact between the liberal left and the neoliberal right, a dual power bloc that looks down on the corpses of socialism and one-nation conservatism (Rancière 2010a, 2010b). This tacit agreement, built on an unwavering commitment to the free market has opened a gap between institutionalised politics and the cultural life of the people. The political establishment no longer speaks to the experiences, hopes and dreams of ordinary people, and dismisses all their fears, no matter how grounded they might be, as irrational and counterproductive to the continued flourishing of progressive cultural life. It is increasingly devoid of the grand visions of fundamental socioeconomic transformation that once made politics real and capable of even modestly and incrementally delivering on the promises made to men and women across the country.

Any honest appraisal of recent times in the west must acknowledge that out there in the real world exists a surfeit of anxiety. We, as a nation, as a culture, as inhabitants of this moribund post-political epoch, appear significantly less sure of ourselves than the generation that emerged from the horrors of the first half of the 20th century to take on the challenges of building a new society among the ruins of the old. We appear to have woken up from the modernist dreams of incremental social improvement into the pervasive cynicism of neoliberal reality. We worry about what lies in store for us, and what lies in store for our children and grandchildren. Despite an abundance of consumer goods and lives full of a million things we must do, in many parts of the west there is an almost palpable sense of lack. Huge numbers from across the social spectrum seem to be in search of some missing object or force that, were it to suddenly reappear, could set matters straight and enable a new positive mood to develop. A general sense that things are not quite right hangs like a pall in the air.

However, we cannot quite manage to identify precisely what is missing, and what might be causing this vague but enduring discomfort. In making this claim some may accuse us of being unnecessarily bleak. However, this bleakness is inextricably tied to the subject matter of this book. As we will see, there are many ordinary people out there who have an even bleaker outlook. They often see for themselves a life of unending struggle, a life in which the pleasures of community life have been withdrawn, a life of frustration, interrupted all too briefly by occasional flurries of consumerist hedonism. They can sense life only as a backward step, the loss of things deemed valuable and important. The benefits of our allegedly open, marketised society are the privileges of others whose elevated position seems unassailable, no matter how corrupt they may be. Those trapped in the lower echelons can see no forward step in their own lives. They are convinced that for them the best times have now been left behind. Things are trending downwards.

As a result of all this, a growing number of these people are now very angry. What they lack is not simply absent. Rather, it has been purposefully removed, appropriated by competitive others keen to secure their own interests. Occasional bursts of happiness and charitable fellow-feeling do little to dispel an obdurate sense of coming crisis, of things wearing away, of rootlessness and loss. Despite the proliferation of affordable consumer goods, advances in technology, the onward march of scientific discovery, improved healthcare, the spread of democracy and great strides made in the tolerance and celebration of difference in culture, sexuality, ethnicity, religion and lifestyle, a shared anxiety about the future and what it may have in store for us cannot be appeased. This malaise is not simply the outcome of marginalisation. It is not simply something that affects those at the very bottom. Even those who appear to us as the great winners of our time seem unable to understand their lives in wholly positive terms. We are all living through a time of great wealth and relative cultural freedom, but despite this, many carry this sense of foreboding. Underneath all the surface freedoms lies a deeper sense of fatalism and lassitude, a sense that something better could exist but does not, and in all likelihood, never will.

While we all tend to acknowledge that there is likely to be some unknown negativity lurking out there in the shadows, for many this awareness is too disturbing to face head on. All awareness of a coming crisis is disavowed and blocked from consciousness. They know, but they do not want to know, so they continue onward as if they are not in possession of this knowledge. It is repressed and seeks its return in other forms disconnected from the underlying set of causes and conditions that gave birth to the crisis. Why think too much and too deeply? What good does it do? No one else appears to be particularly concerned, and what can one individual really achieve these days? Accept the world as it is, and try to make the best of things.

The commercialisation of all popular culture might indeed be crass, but it functions well enough to draw our attention away from the real world, with all its manifold pathologies. Porn, talent shows, reality TV, social networking, gambling. Foreign holidays, celebrity gossip, a big Saturday night out on the town. Lager, weed, coke, speed, sex, takeaway food. Valium, Xanax, Citalopram, Fluoxetine, Prozac. Of course, we can occupy our time in what appear more wholesome ways. Shopping, cooking, sport, DIY, gardening, hobbies. We try to keep busy in ways that suit our personal interests. We fill our days with activities to cover up our deeper inaction, our inability to truly strike out and address those things that must be addressed if genuine progress is to be made. Not that we don't want progress. We occasionally give a few thoughts to vicarious action. We wait for someone or some authoritative body to take measures on our behalf, but our cynicism acts against whatever faith we might still have in transformative politics and the elites who currently dominate our world. We don't really expect too much. That's because everything is flawed. Everything is in some way sullied. We have nothing left to believe in, except our cynical non-belief. Dark thoughts continue to lurk at the edge of consciousness. They press forward in the downtime and demand recognition. They cannot be held at bay forever.

This sense of lack, this sense that something is missing, that something valuable and important has been lost, discarded or stolen from us – and is therefore no longer accessible to the very communities and individuals most in need of it – exists

as a general background to our study. Occasionally this sense of lack migrates to the foreground to be discussed directly by EDL supporters. However, for the most part, it stays in the background, framing foreground events and casting them in its shadow.

It didn't have to be this way...

We hope to carry you, the reader, into the lifeworld of the EDL, and the cultural context that gave birth to it. First, we must warn you that this world is bleak. It does not inspire optimism, that comforting but often politically destructive quality that some readers demand the writer should provide as a matter of duty. Rather, our goal is to enable you, however briefly, to see the world as EDL supporters see it. We also hope to identify the fundamental forces that have encouraged these men and women to adopt such a crude, forthright and hostile worldview. You may find some of this story disturbing, or at least disconcerting. Some will no doubt not even pick up this book, convinced that we know as much as we need to know about these retrograde fascists. Some will claim that writing about them gives them the attention, publicity and credibility that they don't deserve. But those who simply oppose what they do not understand are running away from the political reality of our times. If social scientists are to assist in the task in making sense of that reality, we can't simply restrict ourselves to the nice topics. We can't simply praise the nice people and condemn the bad. We have to go deeper. We have to expose ourselves to challenging topics, and we have to be honest about what we find. So this book presents material that some will find unpalatable. We will also develop an analysis that could make many on the political and academic left feel uncomfortable, and perhaps mildly aggrieved. No matter. We will report the world as we found it, and we will explain that world in a manner that seems to us useful and appropriate.

Looking back on our two decades of grounded social research with the scattered remnants of England's old white working class, only one thought is uppermost in our minds: it didn't have to be this way. Things could have been so much better, for all of

us, and that includes those who have drifted into the dark space occupied by the EDL.

All that said, our analysis should not cast us all into a pit of despair. Nor will it supply unwanted credibility to the dangerous politics of the far right. While our story is often sad, frustrating and worrisome, we remain convinced that only by acknowledging and coming to terms with the worst of our times will a new political movement arise capable of setting matters straight. The reality of the social forces that constitute the EDL are analogous to the physical forces that cause global warming – both stem from activities and events that have already taken place. We have no choice but to deal with the consequences. Nationalism is on the rise across the continent. A large and growing number of working-class men and women feel aggrieved. They feel ignored by mainstream politics. This is a reality, and it makes no sense to deny it. The first step is to reach down to understand what was behind these activities and events in the first place.

What is the English Defence League?

Make no mistake, the EDL represents a misguided attempt to respond politically to the enduring sense of diminishment and lack we have described above. It attempts to restore what has been lost and defend what remains. It hopes to rebuild foundations, and clear away the miasma of fakery and doubt that hangs over our culture. Analysts are right to suggest that far right movements furnish their members with a sense of purpose and possibility (Busher, 2015), but why should people need this in what we are constantly told is a healthy, functioning democracy? After years of cynicism and active disinterest in neoliberalism's democratic apparatus, the rise of the EDL may be the beginning of a crypto-proletarian return to a mode of politics that liberals fear more than anything else. Gradually, dissatisfaction with what exists is slowly pushing individuals back on to the political field. However, ideology has changed, and the established ideological platforms of modern political movements no longer exist in the way they once did. Inevitably, in such a hiatus, there is, as

Tilly (2008) suggests, an air of improvisation to contemporary working-class politics.

The gradual liberalisation of the political left, and its general capitulation to the accountant's logic that organises the global market, have separated it from the lifeworlds of the working class. No reassuring account of a safe and secure future emanates from the left to re-engage those who suffer in permanent insecurity. In many places, the left has become tainted by the stain of connivance and graft. Its main political parties have, in fact, enacted policies that have destabilised working-class neighbourhoods and destroyed traditional labour markets. The time-honoured connection between the left and the working class has been loosened significantly, if not severed altogether. The working class no longer has the progressive symbols of the traditional left to rally behind. Instead, insecure and politically homeless people grope around for something that might explain their parlous circumstances and the general sense of lack that pervades their lifeworlds. In this absence of political representation, explanation and strategic guidance, the EDL's supporters have misidentified their enemy. Instead they can identify only a substitute enemy, a stand-in, a scapegoat towards which they can direct their anger and frustration. Thus the regressive discourse of nationalism, separatism and ethnic demonisation returns (see Chapter Six).

The EDL's rapid rise to prominence offers us a particularly useful high-resolution lens through which we can see in detail the gradual degeneration of English society, culture and politics. The EDL is, of course, a fringe political group cut adrift from mainstream politics and overtly antagonistic to many of the central concerns of contemporary liberal multiculturalism. The group has no system of formal membership. Rather, it attracts supporters who sympathise with the EDL's core principles and goals, the majority of whom drift in and out of its activities. However, despite its fragile and sporadic existence, it maintains core principles founded on a dissatisfaction with immigration policies and a desire to mobilise against the spread of what it sees as the hostile alien culture of radical Islamism. It hopes to defend the interests of the native population from the perceived threats posed by immigrants, multiculturalism and what it imagines to

be the growing power and paramilitary forms of the Muslim faith in England.

EDL supporters are also angry about the power of metropolitan liberalism and its co-optation of the parliamentary system. They are angry because this elite has, in recent years, seen fit to open the borders of Britain to wave after wave of immigration. They are angry because too little has been done to defend the economic and cultural entitlements of the white working class, and they are angry about the 'political correctness' they see as a means of systematically avoiding crucial debates about immigration, ethnic diversity and religious antagonism. They are angry at the perceived capitulation of Westminster to radical Islam at home and abroad, they are angry that our armed forces are not adequately supported and championed, and they are angry at what they perceive to be the gradual dilution of traditional English culture and society.

The street protest is The EDL's principal political activity. They have only the vaguest plans to impact upon the government's policy agenda, and, despite the passionate intensity of their protests, the organisation appears almost totally devoid of revolutionary fervour or a desire for significant structural change. We were unable to detect among EDL supporters any great aspiration to formalise the group, or to transform it into an actual political party. It has no clear hierarchy, and, regionally, those who are identified as 'leaders' tend simply to be those who have been most active in organising protests and meetings. EDL supporters do, however, have an active presence on the internet, especially on social networking sites. Their utopianism, where it exists at all, is vaguely 'conservative' in the rather muddled sense that could sometimes be found in **the old** working-class culture, and tends to concern itself with the inviolability of their own **traditional culture**, 'values' and community life.

While the EDL might on the surface display some of the hallmarks of traditional fascism or Nazism, it also displays a number of significant characteristics that set it apart from these older political forms. For example, many EDL supporters actually speak in support of the Jewish faith and the rights of Israel to defend itself against the perceived aggression of Palestine and neighbouring Islamic states. While much of the academic

literature tells us that the cultural and religious conflicts of today tend to be rooted in regressive forms of bigotry and hatred, such logic fails to represent the reality and historical causes of such conflict. Reducing the complexities of systematised and institutionalised conflict to basic emotional states is too simplistic. However, if we must persevere with such logic, we should note that hatred is, in fact, not the dominant emotion displayed by EDL supporters. While some did express what appeared to be a genuine hatred of radical Islamism, *inarticulate anger* was the basic emotion that appeared to typify the EDL's cultural and political life. Those we spoke to were complex individuals fully capable of feeling and expressing a broad range of emotions and sentiments. However, when we attempted to talk to our respondents in everyday social settings about what we might broadly conceive as political issues, anger that was entirely disconnected from the causes of their parlous socioeconomic position came quickly to the fore.

This palpable sense of underlying and very potent yet inarticulate anger begs a series of questions that structure the argument we develop in this book. The most important are these: What is the EDL angry about? Where does this anger come from, and how do EDL supporters justify and explain it? What is it about Islam, Islamic culture and the realities of Muslim community life that makes everything Islamic the primary object of anger? And why do EDL supporters express their anger in the way they do? Why do they focus on street protests, and why do they not, as a group, engage with the established structures of parliamentary democracy?

Once was England

From the outset it is important to note that the EDL draws the overwhelming majority of its support from Britain's old white working class. The EDL is, unequivocally, a working-class political movement. In making this claim we are not attempting to pathologise the white working class. Rather, we are simply stating a fact that has been made clear to us during our years of fieldwork. We do not deny that the EDL has a few middle-class supporters. However, the EDL's core support is unmistakably

working class. All of those we spoke to displayed the traditional characteristics of white working-class identity and culture.

Our fieldwork was generally conducted in the spaces of contemporary white working-class cultural life. We spent a lot of time in pubs, from the ubiquitous corporate bars of the city centre to neighbourhood boozers on sprawling council estates. We also spent time in the homes of our respondents, and often walked with them around their neighbourhoods. We sat around drinking mugs of tea in greasy spoon cafes, we accompanied our respondents to the bookies, and stood chatting with them on street corners and outside pubs and shops. On Saturdays we often headed off to the football. Certainly, we did not encounter any EDL supporters who identified themselves as middle or upper class. More importantly, many of our contacts were animated by issues connected to the contemporary politics of class. Time and time again we were told that the EDL's cause was to protect the cultural and economic interests of England's forgotten white working class. These men and women are often depicted as unseemly and hostile provocateurs, disrupting an otherwise civilised and hospitable multiethnic urban culture, but to them, their actions were essentially defensive in nature. When they imagined themselves to be moving forward politically, they believed that they were moving forward to reclaim something that had been taken away from them.

Our respondents articulated a general 'politics of us', and in some cases, although certainly not all, this 'politics of us' appeared quite cogent, and reasonably well informed about recent changes to working-class cultural and economic life. Many were quite clearly bonded to their communities, and believed themselves to be standing up to defend these communities from powerful external threats. They spoke at length about the rise of radical Islam and the ubiquitous terrorist threat. They spoke about the involvement of Muslim men in the sexual exploitation of vulnerable young white girls. They spoke about Sharia law and their unwillingness to yield a single additional yard on the field of cultural politics. And when they spoke about these things, they spoke in a forthright manner that reflected their desire to push past the cloying cultural sensitivities that have grown around the popular discussion of immigration, ethnic conflict and religious

diversity. We will excavate the foundations of these motivations and explanations as the book develops.

The sentiments and discourse behind the EDL are connected to the concrete localised consequences of the changing economic and cultural circumstances of the white working class. In their rush to condemn the EDL's politics, many liberal commentators omit this crucial and perfectly obvious fact. Many of our respondents talked in detail about the accumulating problems they faced as they tried to reproduce a reasonably safe and secure life for themselves and for their families. They talked about declining job prospects, job insecurity, low pay and the difficulties of meeting what they considered to be their basic economic obligations. They believed that the politicians of Westminster and the elites of the big city considered the white working class superfluous in a rapidly changing global economy. They believed that, as a class, they had been, and continue to be, downwardly mobile in economic terms, and vilified, excluded and silenced in cultural terms. They were being overtaken by new economic migrants who were playing the system, and mainstream politicians were complicit in the gradual degradation of the neighbourhoods and life chances of the working class. These things bothered our respondents greatly, and other more specific complaints, frustrations and dissatisfactions merged with these issues to supply energy to the EDL's angry critique of politics. Class identity and class interests were, from the outset, of great importance in the EDL's account of itself, and it was immediately clear to us that any attempt to explain the politics of the EDL must position class centrally in its analysis.

We have no desire to produce yet another descriptive account of the changing class system and the life chances of the white working class, and nor will we reduce the rise of the EDL to the economic instability caused by fundamental changes made to global political economy in the neoliberal era. These issues are important as primary conditions in which anger becomes a probability for those who suffer the worst consequences of this epochal shift, but they cannot, by themselves, explain why the EDL developed when it did and in the manner it did. By itself, an analysis of economic change and the systemic decline of Britain's productivist full employment economy will shed little