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The ideology and discourse of the English Defence League: 'Not racist, not violent, just no longer silent'

Abstract

The English Defence League (EDL) emerged in 2009 and quickly became a major 'anti-Islamist' street protest movement, able to attract thousands to its national demonstrations. Despite the violence and anti-Muslim rhetoric associated with its protests, the group claims to be an anti-racist human rights organisation dedicated to protecting liberal freedoms. This article employs a critical methodology to address these claims, analysing EDL literature alongside strategies identified as typical of racist discourse construction. The representations, narratives and rhetorical strategies used by the group support the analysis of EDL Islamophobia as a form of cultural racism that constructs opposing 'British' and 'Muslim' subjects and functions to maintain traditional ethno-cultural dominance of the former over the latter.

Keywords: English Defence League; British Muslims; Islamophobia; cultural racism; racist discourse construction

Introduction

The English Defence League (EDL) emerged in 2009 as a mass street protest movement able to attract supporters in the thousands to demonstrate against 'Islamic extremism' in towns and cities across the UK. Dozens of protests have been staged (including marches, static protests, and 'flash demonstrations'), which have often descended into violence as supporters broke through police lines to assault local Asians, confront counter-protesters, and attack Asian businesses and property (Copsey 2010, 26). By September 2011 the cost of policing demonstrations was estimated to be in excess of £10 million, with more than 600 arrests made in connection with EDL protest (P. Jackson et al. 2011, p. 68; 71-73). The movement has repeatedly asserted that it is only opposed to 'Islamic extremists', rather than 'ordinary Muslims', yet at street level this distinction disappeared, with protest chants including: 'I hate Pakis more than you' (Booth, Taylor, & Lewis 2009); 'Give me a gun and I will shoot the Muzzie scum' (Garland and Treadwell 2010, 25); and 'Allah, Allah, who the fuck is Allah?' (Tweedie 2009).

Despite the violence and anti-Muslim rhetoric that has become associated with the EDL, the group consistently denies Islamophobia, claiming to be a human rights organisation dedicated to preserving free speech against encroaching 'Islamic extremism'. The strong anti-racist position espoused in the EDL's mission statement (EDL 2011a) is expressed in the protest chant: 'not racist, not violent, just no longer silent' (EDL 2012a), and was dramatically demonstrated in a 2009 publicity stunt during which masked men gathered under a large banner proclaiming 'black and white unite' and set alight a swastika flag as they announced to invited journalists: 'There are no racists or fascists in the English Defence League. We are black and white, united. The proof is in the pudding.' (Tweedie 2009).

There have been a number of academic studies of the group, (Allen 2010; Bartlett & Littler 2011; Burnett 2011; Busher 2013; N. Copsey 2010; Feldman 2012; Garland & Treadwell 2010; Goodwin 2013a; Goodwin & Evans 2012; P. Jackson et al. 2011; Treadwell 2012; Treadwell & Garland 2011), which have focused primarily on the attitudes and ideology of EDL supporters. These studies address an important aspect of the popular appeal of the EDL, yet it is remarkable the extent to

which the group's own justification for its existence and ideological position has been ignored. The present study contributes to the literature by discursively analysing publicly available texts produced by the English Defence League in order to determine the central tenets of the group's ideological representation of Muslims and analyse the claim that they are not racist.

In this paper we show that despite the group's claims to the contrary, EDL Islamophobia is an example of (culturally) racist discourse construction. Through the demarcation of a non-Muslim in-group, presented as superior in culture and values, and a Muslim out-group, which is represented as threatening the privilege and position of the former, EDL discourse functions ideologically to maintain traditional ethno-cultural privilege and exclude Muslims from the national community. An analysis of the articles published on the *EDL News* section of its website reveals three central narratives that make up the core of EDL discursive representation of Muslims; that Muslims are uniquely problematic, that 'Islamic ideology' is the source of these problems, and that all Muslims share responsibility for reforming their religion. These narratives are critiqued in order to identify the contestable claims that the discourse rests upon, before moving on to demonstrate how EDL Islamophobia functions as a culturally racist discourse. Muslim culture was essentialised as an immutable obstacle to integration, and through strategies typical of racist discourse construction, such as denials, projection, diminutives, and positive-self/negative-other representations, the EDL rearticulated Islamophobia as anti-racism and attempted to normalise it as the natural perspective of those committed to liberal freedom. The EDL may not be traditionally racist, but the culturally racist discourse employed distributed privilege and laid blame along a hierarchical line through the construction of opposing and irreconcilable subjects: Muslims, who were blamed for society's ills and required to radically reform their religion, and non-Muslims, who were considered the blameless victims of 'Islamic extremism'.

The English Defence League and the far right

The English Defence League emerged in 2009 as a major 'anti-Islamist' street protest group. In March 2009 *Ahlus Sunnah wal Jammah*, an offshoot of *al-Muhajiroun*, had protested at the homecoming parade of the 2nd battalion Royal Anglian Regiment, returning from a six-month tour of Iraq. After shouting abuse at the soldiers and holding up inflammatory banners reading 'baby killers' and 'butchers', the crowd turned on them, providing the spark for the formation of United People of Luton, which later became the EDL (Copsey 2010, 8). The group grew dramatically through social networking sites (Garland & Treadwell 2010, 22-23) and has held dozens of protests in cities and towns across the country, proving able to attract supporters in the thousands for its national demonstrations (Copsey 2010, 27-29).

If the EDL's influence appeared to be waning in 2013, the events in Woolwich on 22 May illustrated its continuing relevance. In response to the hacking to death of a soldier by two British men who declared a Jihadist motive, the group called for 'feet on the streets', and around 100 men descended on Woolwich shouting anti-Muslim slogans and engaging in running battles with police (Quinn & Urquhart 2013). Tommy Robinson, the group's *de facto* leader, stated: 'What you saw today is Islam. Everyone's had enough.' (Jones et al. 2013). In less than 24 hours the number of supporters of the group's Facebook page had more than tripled (Goodwin 2013b), and attendees at the group's 25 May Newcastle demonstration (planned before the Woolwich events) exceeded 1,500 (Wright et al. 2013).

The tactics and discourse of EDL demonstrations, as well supporters' comments on its social networking sites, have led to difficulties in conceptualising the movement. As noted, protests have often involved racist chanting and hate speech, yet the EDL's online articles consistently advocate anti-racism. The liberal tropes that infuse EDL discourse, as well as its efforts to recruit ethnic and

sexual minorities, are apparently incongruous with the claims of oppositional groups such as Unite Against Fascism that the EDL are simply racist. This paradox has implications for considering the group a far right organisation. Several scholars have noted that contemporary extreme right parties have sought to cast off their thuggish image and appeal more to the electorate by careful avoidance of overtly racist language (Atton 2006; Eatwell 2006; Goodwin 2007; Halikiopoulou & Vasilopoulou 2010; Newman 2007). Is the EDL merely a new manifestation of this phenomenon? A brief comparison with Britain's most successful far right party, the British National Party (BNP), serves to illustrate that although similarities exist, there are important differences which make the identification of the EDL within the far right category problematic.

While BNP and EDL ideology share surface level resemblances, these should not be overstated. Both groups focus on Islam as a central danger threatening Britain, yet for the BNP Muslims are merely a particular symptom of the wider problem of immigration and multiculturalism. Muslims are considered racial 'others' by the BNP, lacking the white Anglo-Saxon 'liberal gene' that genetically predisposes the British to liberal democratic culture (Williams & Law 2011, para. 5.7-5.8). This focus on Muslims as biologically not-British is illustrated by the party's representation of the 2005 London bombings as '...genocidal race attacks by immigrant Islamic Fascists against White Christian British people....' (Wood & Finlay 2008, p. 713). Similarly, its solutions to the problem of Islamist terrorism - closure of borders, an end to immigration, a programme of expulsion and abolishment of multiculturalism (Wood & Finlay 2008, p. 721) - exemplify the BNP's preoccupation with racial purity, as well as its opportunism. It is true that the increased hardening of public attitudes towards Muslims has provided a platform of populist legitimacy on which the BNP has argued for its racist policies, but it is precisely this focus on race that distances it from the EDL.

The EDL, by contrast, disavows crude biological determinism, and uses a more sophisticated discourse of culture to mark out Islam out as a sociological, rather than a biological, impediment to assimilation. The movement rejects the BNP's conflation of Muslims, immigrants and non-whites, and does not concern itself with multiculturalism in general. In EDL discourse Muslims are sharply distinguished from other immigrant communities in the UK, which are looked upon favourably in comparison. In distinction to the BNP's repatriation policies, EDL solutions centre on presenting the 'real facts' about Islam to the public and the demand that Muslims reform their religion. It should also be noted that a strong vein of anti-Semitism runs through the contemporary BNP (Copsey 2008, p. 162; Richardson 2013, pp. 107-109). Manifested in claims of media control and the attribution of multiculturalism to a Jewish conspiracy, this ideological pillar of the far right is certainly not shared by the EDL. With its firm support of Israel, the existence of a Jewish division within its ranks and its regular denouncement of anti-Semitism, the EDL cannot be said to subscribe to such conspiracy theories, at least regarding Jews.

As Joel Busher (2013, p. 68) has argued, being anti-racist is an important element of identity construction for EDL activists, and the consistent rejection of BNP advances are a point of pride for the movement (EDL 2011g). Although there are reasons to be cautious about future directions, particularly with regard to the type of supporter it potentially attracts and the malleability of the group's ideology, at this point in its history there are clearly marked and profound differences between the EDL and the established far right. The English Defence League does not biologically racialise the threat from Islam or blame multiculturalism and immigration for the 'Muslim problem' it perceives, and the ends sought are far removed from the repatriation policies advocated by the BNP.

One reason the EDL has been categorised within the far right is that previous studies have concentrated predominantly on the attitudes and ideology of supporters. These have included examinations of the nature and threat of EDL protest (Allen 2010; Burnett 2011); studies highlighting the demographic profile of self-identified members (Bartlett & Littler 2011; Goodwin & Evans 2012);

and ethnographic studies which have investigated the discourse and ideology of EDL supporters (Busher 2013; Garland & Treadwell 2010; Goodwin 2013a; Treadwell & Garland 2011). While there is demonstrable need for more work on this topic, this article is not concerned with the attitudes of supporters, and focuses instead on what may be termed the official ideology of the English Defence League.

There are significant differences between the EDL's stated ideology and the concerns of those who claim ideological affinity with the group. Previous studies have suggested that anti-Islam prejudice accounts for only one part of supporters' concerns (Bartlett & Littler 2011; Goodwin 2013a). Matthew Goodwin (2013a, pp. 8-11), for example, found that those who agreed with the ideals and/or methods of the EDL were more likely to be authoritarian and xenophobic, and held more negative attitudes towards immigration and ethnic minority groups. In contrast, it is striking the extent to which the issue of immigration is ignored by the EDL in its official material. Only two of 117 *EDL News* articles discussed immigration, and neither politicised the issue, stating only that the government's approach had been 'seriously flawed' (EDL 2011a), but: 'Just because the government has been far too focused on the advantages of immigration (without consideration of the possible problems), is no reason to forget the advantages altogether' (EDL 2011g). Indeed, contrary to the generalised xenophobia and opposition to immigration espoused by supporters, some articles specifically argued against this, stating the benefits of immigration to Britain (EDL 2011n; EDL 2011g) and emphasising positive aspects of cultural diversity (EDL 2012c; EDL 2011i). In the pages of *EDL News*, immigration and multiculturalism are not in themselves problematic, rather, it is Muslims who are considered culturally problematic: '... it is not multiculturalism, but Islam, that has failed' (EDL 2011g). While supporters may hold generalised anti-immigration prejudice, official EDL discourse either ignores or specifically argues against this.

It is important, therefore, to emphasise ideological variance between the movement and its supporters. The group operates as an umbrella organisation for anyone who wishes to demonstrate against 'Islamic extremism', and those who protest under its banner will surely have additional anxieties. The EDL itself, however, quite consciously shuns wider issues to focus exclusively on Islam. To some extent, these differences afford the group an element of plausible deniability against charges of racism, Islamophobia and extremism. The fact that the EDL has no formal structure of membership and exists as an organisation to which people are affiliated (and can therefore become dis-affiliated) is advantageous, since those using overtly racist language at protests or on its social networking sites can be claimed to not possibly belong; since the EDL is avowedly anti-racist why would racists want to join its protests? (EDL 2011h). This rhetorical question underlines the need to analyse the official discourse of the group. Why, indeed, are those with the attitudes described by Goodwin attracted to the EDL?

One notable exception to the tendency to concentrate on EDL supporters in the academic literature is Paul Jackson's report on the movement, which combined analysis of its supporters, leaders and protests with a small-scale analysis of EDL texts, and argued that the EDL could be more accurately described as a new far right movement. The new far right, in actively distancing itself from neo-Nazi and anti-Semitic themes, represents a departure from traditional far right concerns but employs a culturally racist ethno-nationalist xenophobia which has the same exclusionary effects on target groups (Jackson et al. 2011, pp. 8-9). Through the English Defence League, this finds expression in Islamophobia, and it is to the discursive construction of this targeted anti-Muslim cultural racism that the present article turns.

Since the EDL claims to have no interest in electoral politics it does not produce pamphlets explaining its purpose and goals. In the absence of such platforms, the only texts which elucidate the group's official ideology are the articles which make up the *EDL News* section of the website englishdefenceleague.org. These represent an effort to justify demonstrations, deflect negative

media attention, explain the EDL's concern with 'radical Islam', and rally supporters to its cause. Links to these articles are provided on the group's *Facebook* and *Twitter* pages, and consequently every online follower receives regular exposure to this material on their social network newsfeed. As the EDL's internet popularity soars (Goodwin 2013b), an analysis of its ideological representation of Muslims is crucial.

The discourse of *EDL News*

EDL News contains articles and commentary, as well as information for forthcoming demonstrations and campaigns. As of 29 February 2012 there were a total of 117 publicly available articles, 86 of which discussed Muslims and/or Islam and formed the corpus for further analysis. The analysis proceeded as follows: first, an initial survey was undertaken in order to ascertain the topics addressed when the EDL discussed Islam and Muslims. The ten most frequent topics were, in order of frequency: extremism (appearing in 55.8% of the articles), terrorism (33.7%), violence (31.4%), segregatory tendencies (24.4%), supremacism (20.9%), misogyny/sexism (20.9%), child-grooming (18.6%), intolerance (16.1%), Islam's anti-democratic tendencies (14%), and homophobia (14%).

Second, the corpus of 86 articles was subjected to predicate analysis, which focused on the ideational collocates of the nouns 'Islam' and 'Muslim' in order to determine central narratives, frames and themes (Richardson 2009, p. 360). This step identified three consistently recurring narratives. First, Muslims were seen as uniquely problematic, posing a distinctive threat to British people and to 'British values'. Second, the problems caused by Muslims were thought to be traceable to Islam itself: through scripture, the example of the Prophet and 'Islamic ideology'. Finally, Muslims were believed to be responsible, for both the actions of their co-religionists and reform of Islam. By failing to speak out against fellow Muslims and root out problematic individuals within their communities, the EDL claimed that Muslims had abandoned their responsibilities and must therefore be coerced into reform.

These narratives appeared consistently, regardless of which topic a particular article focused on, suggesting that they form the core of EDL ideological representation of Muslims. The final part of the analysis followed a critical methodology (Jackson 2007, p. 397), where each narrative was subjected to a first order critique, in order to identify contradictions, myths and misrepresentations, and a second order critique, which considered the ideological effects of EDL discourse, through a comparison of rhetorical strategies with those identified as typical of racist discourse construction.

Taking each narrative in turn, the article proceeds by identifying how Muslims were problematised by the EDL and critically examining these claims, before moving on to consider the rhetorical strategies employed and demonstrate how EDL discourse functioned ideologically as a form of racial discourse.

Narrating Islamophobia: Central themes of EDL representation of Muslims and Islam

1. Muslims as uniquely problematic

The EDL presented Muslims as a unique and exclusive threat to Britain. In addition to the recycling of negative topics across the articles (extremism, terrorism, etc.), within-text repetition of Muslim deviance served to indicate the conviction that society's problems could be laid at Islam's door:

The biggest threat to British Muslims isn't 'Islamophobia', it's the extremism that thrives [with]in the Muslim community – the embrace of violent and anti-democratic means, the

intolerance, the separatism, the attacks on homosexuals and Jews, the hatred of 'the West', and the continued hosting of radical preachers. (EDL 2011b).

These repeated lists of negative behaviour were presented as the exclusive reserve of Muslims. The most common activities highlighted were extremism and terrorism; however Muslims were also associated with violence more broadly. Two cases in particular serve to highlight how local incidents were used by the group to further their agenda: the case of Rhea Page, who was attacked in Leicester by a group of Somali women in June 2010; and the assault of Daniel Stringer-Prince in February 2012 by a group of Asian youths in Hyde, Greater Manchester. In response to these incidents the EDL organised demonstrations against 'Islamic extremism' in both Leicester and Hyde (in the latter case against the family's wishes). *EDL News* justification of the demonstrations, as well as speeches made at the rallies, explicitly connected Islam to the violence, despite there being no demonstrable link in either case between the religious background of the offenders and the attacks:

Islamic extremism is barely out of the news, and neither is the self-imposed segregation of the Muslim community, or the intolerance and religious supremacism that, unfortunately, so often goes with it. In this context, isn't it reasonable to ask whether Daniel was likely to have been attacked not because of his skin colour, but because he was non-Muslim? (EDL 2012b).

In the Stringer-Prince case the religious background of the assailants was not clear (Carter 2012), and though the Rhea Page case was complicated by the possibility that it was racially aggravated (the attackers shouted 'white bitch' as they assaulted her), that she had been targeted as a non-Muslim was never suggested by police or the prosecution. In justifying their demonstration against the 'two tier' justice system that had handed suspended sentences to Page's attackers, reportedly because they were Somali Muslims not used to drinking alcohol, the EDL nevertheless suggested that, given the supremacist beliefs of Muslims, Page may have been targeted as a non-believer:

Somali Muslims might not be used to alcohol, but if they're members of the religion of peace, then surely they should be uniquely placed to know that violence is wrong? Or is it not too bad when it's aimed at the non-believers? (EDL 2011c).

These incidents demonstrate the contentious nature of the 'facts' employed by the EDL, and show how tenuous associations between the supposed background of the attackers and their violent behaviour were made on the basis of assumptions.

The EDL used the example of other minorities to illustrate the uniquely problematic nature of Muslims, claiming that the former had integrated within the national community without difficulty. By stressing the 'seamless integration' of other minorities, the EDL emphasised the unique challenges posed by Muslims whilst simultaneously neutralising possible objections that racist attitudes had hampered Muslim integration:

... there have never been any problems with Sikh integration in this country... Sikhs have shown an impressive willingness to integrate, to accept the laws of the land, and to confront and defeat any form of extremism. (EDL 2011d).

There is no dangerous ideology of hatred and division sweeping Black, White or Asian communities. In modern Britain extremism exists predominately in the Muslim Community... (EDL 2011e).

This narrative is deeply ideological, and disregards the long history of struggle in which minority communities have engaged to have their cultures and customs recognised. The suggestion that Sikhs had been unconditionally accepted by British society overlooked the protracted struggle to be

allowed to carry the *kirpan* (ceremonial dagger), as well as the turban disputes at work (and for motorcyclists), both of which resulted in national debates about Sikh's ability to integrate (Nesbitt 2011, 227). The threat to social cohesion and national identity posed by black communities has also been a recurring theme of national debate (Christian 2005), and such ideas still hold currency today, as demonstrated by the discussions around the 2011 English riots, which singled out 'black culture' as a major contributory factor (Barrett 2011). The fact that these debates are far from settled in the 21st century illustrates the EDL's deliberate distortion of history, both of minority communities and their acceptance into the national community.

Having identified the major problems in British society as stemming from one particular 'community', the explanation for such behaviour was situated in the shared 'ideology' that was believed to inspire it. Islam was identified by the EDL as the crucial causal factor that provided Muslims with motive and justification for their behaviour.

2. *The problematic nature of 'Islamic ideology'*

The EDL explained perceived Muslim over-representation in anti-social behaviour by referring to Islamic teaching. Scripture was believed to sanction such activities, and this was illustrated with selective and de-contextualised passages from the Qur'an. Islam was regarded as the rationale for all Muslim behaviour, and thus the source of the problems identified. Considered intrinsically Muslim problems, extremism and terrorism were represented as embedded within the religion:

The sheer number of cases of Islamic extremism should suggest ... that the problem should not be seen as being with a sub-sect of Islam that no one can really define... but as a problem with Islam itself. (EDL 2011g)

The suicide bombers are always described as being good or devout Muslims. Hey, you think Islam itself could be a problem? (EDL 2011f).

The influence that Islamic teaching had on other criminal activities was also highlighted, and in this context the EDL's analysis of the Rochdale and West Midlands child-grooming scandals merits close attention. The group claimed that Muslims were over-represented in these crimes, and argued that the sexual exploitation of young (white) girls could be traced to Islamic scripture, which promoted the inferiority of non-Muslims and thus made them acceptable targets:

... many Muslim men see little wrong with applying the example of the prophet (sex with young children) to those who they regard as "dirty kuffar" (non-Muslims, not worthy of the same rights as Muslims under the Sharia - Islamic Law). (EDL 2011d).

The group's assertion that these were Muslim crimes was based on nothing more than the Pakistani heritage of the majority of the perpetrators. The extent to which the men involved were practising Muslims is unknown, and any notion that 'Islamic supremacism' may have fuelled their activities was not reported. Nevertheless, as with the cases of Rhea Page and Daniel Stringer-Prince, the EDL were confident enough to demonstrate outside court at both hearings in order to protest the 'Islamic extremism' they claimed had resulted in these crimes. The idea that members of 'Muslim child grooming' gangs were 'Islamic extremists' stretched the term beyond recognition. Men who plied young girls with alcohol and exploited them for sexual gratification were clearly not following any interpretation of the Qur'an, extreme or otherwise, and sexual offences can hardly be deemed a 'Muslim' problem. The fact that 85% of sex offenders in the UK are white men (Crown Prosecution Service 2011), did not lead the EDL to deeply question the ideological foundations upon which masculinity is constructed, yet the assumed Muslim background of the perpetrators in these cases was focused upon as if it had explanatory value.

The understanding that scripture provided the rationale for Muslim criminality endorsed the conviction that Islam was inherently dangerous to British society. As a consequence every Muslim, indeed every person with a Muslim background or name, was considered suspicious and (potentially) guilty by association. Accordingly, nothing less than total reform of Islam was demanded.

3. *Muslims as responsible for reforming their religion*

The English Defence League stressed that all Muslims shared responsibility for the ills they identified, and therefore must make efforts not only to root out those engaged in such behaviours but also to make Islam more acceptable through reform. Because such efforts (if they had been made at all) were considered to have failed, the EDL contended that Muslims had shown themselves unwilling to make the changes demanded of them, and their commitment to 'British values' was questioned. Muslims were deemed to have wilfully ignored thriving extremism in their midst, complaining about discrimination and those who insulted Islam rather than addressing the *Islamic* root of such behaviour and making efforts to prevent radicalisation:

Islamic extremism is an Islamic problem, and the Muslim community needs to get its house in order. (EDL 2011g)

... [it is] Islam that has a problem with extremism. And this should entail certain responsibilities. It should mean that there is a clear need for reform. (EDL 2011i).

For the EDL, Muslims had failed to stem the tide of negative behaviour within their communities because they did not see the need, or have the will, to take action. The group claimed that Muslims were shirking their responsibilities and attempting to deflect attention from their failures by remonstrating about discrimination instead of tackling difficult issues:

WAKE UP CALL – Muslims, it is up to YOU to sort out these problems... You cannot moan about being treated with suspicion when you do nothing to deal with those extremists within your communities. (EDL 2011j).

Muslim community leaders often appear not to have noticed any Islamic extremism at all. They consistently refuse to accept any portion of blame... (EDL 2012c).

The allegation that Muslim leaders had failed to undermine extremist ideas from an Islamic perspective was considered evidence that Muslims were evading their responsibilities and, through their silence, providing implicit support for such ideas. The contention that Muslims had not addressed these issues deliberately disregarded the myriad voices that have condemned violence and terrorism over the past decade. To mention just a few: Pakistani religious scholar Dr Tahir il-Qadri, who, in March 2010, issued a 600 page *fatwa* against terrorism and extremism, rebutting every Islamic justification used by al-Qaeda (Casciani 2010); the *Minhaj-ul-Quran* International peace conference at Wembley arena, organised to mark the 10th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, which had an attendance of 12,000 and included a range of Muslim speakers who all unequivocally denounced terrorism (Press Association 2011); the '*jihad* against violence' campaign by British Muslim women's group *Inspire* which aimed to ideologically and practically combat violence (particularly against women) justified in the name of Islam (Siddique 2011); and the Muslim Council of Britain's repeated condemnations of Islam inspired terrorism (Bari 2007; Muslim Council of Britain 2001; 2005). These few examples illustrate that diverse Muslim organisations have understood the need to tackle extremist ideas, and were willing to take on the challenge. The EDL's insistence that Islam *was* the source of extremism and violence rendered these voices meaningless.

The perception that Muslims had failed to confront extremism led the EDL to suggest that a pool of support for 'extremist' ideas must exist:

We're always told that this silent majority reject extremism, but if that is the case then why are they so silent? We can think of three possible reasons: either they do not really reject extremism, they are terrified of speaking out against the radicals, or they do not feel any need to press for reform (EDL 2011b).

The EDL considered Muslim rejection of extremism disingenuous, and implied this was due to insincerity and lack of will. Pointing to 'Islamic extremist' groups such as *al-Muhajiroun*, the EDL claimed that if Muslims were serious about eradicating extremism such groups would not exist. The actions of *Ahlu Sunnah wal Jammah* at the Royal Anglian Regiment homecoming parade was used to support this contention, and portrayed as exemplary of thriving extremism and evidence that Muslim words were empty. Yet the EDL's analysis of this incident, in its assumption that these actions were religiously motivated, discounted the intrinsically *political* nature of the act. *Ahlu Sunnah wal Jammah* may have protested as an Islamic group, and used religious language and symbolism in their demonstration, but the protest was essentially political. It was in opposition to the Iraq war and the actions there of British soldiers and the British government. The religious discourse of the protesters was incidental to their central message, yet EDL reductionism considered it an implicit expression of 'Islamic extremism', and the fact that the group existed at all affirmed the belief that Muslims had failed to root out the extremism they had promised to combat.

The conviction that 'extremism' was thriving, along with the belief that Muslim pledges to fight it were insincere, led to the conclusion that there must be widespread support for such ideas within Muslim communities. The EDL chose to accept the rhetoric of 'extremist' groups as representative; concluding that if such groups could religiously justify their claims there must be a large number of less vocal Muslims with the same ideas.

The ideological effects of EDL discourse

The English Defence League not only put forward the case that Muslims and Islam were to blame for the various problems identified, but also used a range of rhetorical strategies to construct two opposing subjects: 'British' and 'Muslim'. These supposedly irreconcilable identities were then used by the group to contain challenges to the traditional ethno-cultural dominance of non-Muslims over Muslims. The discussion that follows delineates these strategies in order to demonstrate how the EDL presented Muslims as intrinsically and inescapably not-British, and in doing so were able to represent British identity and values as superior.

EDL discourse repeatedly used positive-self and negative-other representation to show that deviant Muslims were breaking well established British norms. This was evident not only from the extensive negative topics across the texts, but also within-text rhetorical strategies. An important part of this strategy is the denial of prejudice (Berry & Bonilla-Silva 2008, 237; van Dijk 1999, 150-151), and the EDL achieved this by marking a distinction between 'ordinary Muslims' and 'Islamic extremists' and claiming to oppose only the latter. This distinction broke down continuously within the discourse, as the group clearly identified Muslim culture and Islamic scripture as the source of problems and all Muslims as dangerously predisposed to such behaviour. In their positive self-representation the EDL laid claim to British tolerance and convivial values. The integration of other minority groups was represented as an account of British acceptance and hospitality, which simultaneously portrayed Muslims as rejecting integration and testing the boundaries of acceptability with their persistent demands. The EDL's commitment to liberalism functioned in much the same way. Through its claim to welcome all races, faiths, and political persuasions, including

'moderate' Muslims, the group presented itself as embodying British liberal values. Muslims who rejected the EDL could therefore be labelled 'extremist', since rejecting the group was a rejection of the values it claimed to embody.

The claim that Muslims were making unreasonable demands that exceeded the cultural tolerance of British society further emphasised this positive-self/negative-other representation. This rhetorical strategy is linked to the power relations of racist discourse (Augoustinos & Every 2007, p. 126), where the majority group considers itself at liberty to decide whether demands are reasonable or unreasonable and marks the limits of tolerance in order to determine whether the out-group has transgressed the boundaries of social acceptability. This found expression in the discourse of the EDL's campaigns against mosques, which implicitly drew upon the notion that the dominant (non-Muslim) group was entitled to decide the number of 'necessary' mosques and the range of views that were allowed to be expressed within them.

Projection strategies were used to assert that Muslims had a superiority complex, with almost a fifth of the articles discussing 'Islamic supremacism'. This projection of cultural racism onto Muslims represented them as violating established egalitarian norms, whilst simultaneously casting non-Muslims as victims. The discourse of white victimhood has been highlighted by scholars of contemporary racial ideology (Bonilla-Silva, Lewis, & Embrick 2004, 567-568; [PubMed](#) Feagin, Vera, & Batur 2001, 189-194), who note that those espousing this discourse share an ideological world in which equality legislation has erased discrimination. Claims by minorities that they are victims of discrimination are thus met with scepticism and viewed as attempts to use their 'race' to gain advantages ('playing the race card'). The EDL's assertion of the inherently supremacist nature of Islam meant that Muslim actions were considered expressions of this supremacism. Mosques were thus deemed symbolic of Muslim desires to dominate, increasingly available *halal* meat was seen as evidence of the 'creeping Islamification' of Britain, and Muslim political participation was viewed with deep suspicion as entrism and an attempt to expand the reach of Islam within the British political system. Muslims were believed to be culturally colonising the UK, and the EDL claimed that non-Muslims were, and would increasingly be, disadvantaged and victimised as a result. This projection of supremacist motivation thus formed the basis for EDL counter-mobilisation against Muslim demands, ideologically formulated as a fight for equal treatment (Doane 2006, 269).

A further strategy was the presentation of views as reflecting external reality rather than internal psychology. Racist discourse entails an outlook in which negative perceptions of minorities are articulated not as irrational fears, but as factually grounded in the out-group's transgression of norms (Augoustinos & Every 2007, 127). Islamophobia works in much the same way. Justification for the EDL's preoccupation with Muslims was explained as a natural reaction to their negative behaviour, a consequence of living in proximity that politicians and the 'liberal elite', whose lives were far removed from the 'Islamic ghettos', could not possibly understand. The English Defence League constantly referred to itself as a *symptom* of 'Islamic extremism', and stated that if the government could be trusted to tackle it there would be no need for the EDL. The contention that the EDL is merely the consequence of unacceptable Muslim behaviour is an ideological claim which naturalises Islamophobia as a reasonable reaction, rather than a prejudicial ideology, and effectively blames Muslims for anti-Muslim sentiment.

'Denials' ('I'm not racist but...') function in racist discourse to present the positive-self image of speakers as tolerant and speaking within the boundaries of acceptability (van Dijk 1992, 91-92). The EDL utilised this rhetorical strategy in its refutation of Islamophobia. Ridiculed and dismissed as the paranoid fantasies of Muslims, who should be directing their energies towards rooting out extremists, Islamophobia was believed to be nonsensical. The group insisted that no one in the EDL had an irrational fear of Islam or a 'mental illness' that would prejudice them against Muslims (EDL 2011m). This reduction of Islamophobia to individual prejudice served to deflect accusations of

bigotry, however, as the discourse and narratives employed by the EDL demonstrate, Islamophobia is much more than this. Far from being merely a negative assessment of Islam and a fear of individual Muslims, it is cultural racism: an ideological discourse that demarcates an in-group and an out-group and presents the former as superior and its privilege endangered.

Etienne Balibar (2007, 83-84) has argued that culture may have replaced biology in new racism but, predicated on a fear of the 'other' and giving rise to an identical denial of rights, the ideological underpinnings remain the same. The EDL constantly represented culture as a bounded and naturalised sociological signifier, where Muslims were deemed to be the bearers of an innate and opposing Islamic culture which could not be absorbed into Britain, and cultural differences were considered insurmountable unless Islam was entirely reformed. The assumption that integration must be one-way and on the terms of the dominant group is implicitly an expression of the superiority of 'British culture', and the constant refrain that Muslims hold unacceptable and inassimilable values contains within it a denial of the right to challenge 'traditional values' as British citizens. While the EDL instrumentalised 'British values' for decidedly illiberal ends in order to vehemently criticise Islam, the reverse would be unthinkable. Muslims were constrained by the discourse to such an extent that any conception of the social good expressed in religious terms would be considered exemplary of latent extremism.

The deeply ideological nature of EDL discursive representation of Muslims suggests that it should be analysed as a form of cultural racism. EDL Islamophobia worked on one hand to preserve traditional ethno-cultural dominance and privilege, and on the other to contain challenges to this dominance, believed to stem primarily from Muslim communities. The representation of Muslims by the EDL reproduced and sustained the cultural dominance of non-Muslims over Muslims based on a set of 'British values' that the latter were thought to violate, and the right of those who believed themselves to uphold these values to decide the boundaries of tolerance and police the behaviour of others.

The analysis of Islamophobia as an affective prejudice (a *fear* of Islam or Muslims) has led to difficulties of conceptualisation that the EDL gleefully exploited in their dismissal of the term as nonsense. Yet, if we retreat from the notion that Islamophobia is an individual negative attitude, and instead consider it a shared social narrative, its ideological usefulness becomes more apparent. Islamophobia has currency enough to motivate thousands to take to the streets, and tens of thousands to claim some affinity to the EDL because, like all racial discourse, it has ideological value. In its explanation of social problems as resulting from cultural deviance, Islamophobia not only identifies Muslims as problematic, but also relieves the rest of society of responsibility. The EDL's constant chastisement of Muslims, whether for their lack of will or success in tackling extremism, or their failure to see that it is *their* problem, reflects the group's belief that the rest of British society bears no responsibility. Islamophobia has ideological appeal precisely because it finds non-Muslim Britons blameless.

Conclusion

In April 2011, Adrian Tudway, the Metropolitan Police's National Co-ordinator for Domestic Extremism, sent an email to the National Association of Muslim Police, stating:

... [the EDL] are not extreme right wing as a group. Indeed if you look at their published material on their web-site, they are actively moving away from the right and violence with their mission statement etc... I really think you need to open a direct line of dialogue with them, that might be the best way to engage them...(Dodd & Taylor 2011).

Extremism is, by definition, relative, and Tudway's comments suggest either that he has taken the EDL's claims at face value, or that he subscribes to some extent to the 'problematic Muslims' discourse. It is difficult to imagine these comments addressed to any other group in society; they are only acceptable because there is some social currency to understanding Muslims as problematic and the 'Muslim community' as responsible for changing anti-Islam views. To underscore this point, it is worth considering whether an Islamist website, which drew constant attention to the criminal deviance of non-Muslim Britons, explained this behaviour with reference to inferior British values, and organised thousand-strong demonstrations throughout the country which regularly resulted in non-Muslims being targeted with violence and intimidation, would be considered 'extremist'. It is equally absurd to imagine that Jews would be advised by the National Co-ordinator to engage with an openly anti-Semitic group that was, nonetheless, 'moving away' from violence.

This article has shown that the English Defence League employed a culturally racist discourse of Islamophobia. Racist discourse construction involves the demarcation of an in-group and an out-group, where the in-group considers itself superior and claims the right to decide who can belong, and the out-group is represented as threatening its privileges and position. EDL discourse performed this function by racialising Muslim culture as the source of Muslim behaviour and conferring the role of arbiters of acceptability to culturally superior non-Muslims. The group utilised rhetorical strategies such as denial of prejudice, projection of culturally racist motivations on to Muslims, positive-self and negative-other representation, and diminutives such as 'we are not against all Muslims, but...' These strategies worked to construct Islam as oppositional to British values and identity and contained an implicit assumption of the latter's superiority. The EDL's claim that it only opposed 'radical Islam' dissolved into a discourse that laid the blame for the problems of society at Islam's door and made aggressive demands that the religion be reformed to be more acceptable. Whether the EDL leadership sincerely believes itself not to be Islamophobic is a moot point, but knowingly or otherwise it employs a discourse which stratifies British society hierarchically, constructs opposing subject positions for Muslims and non-Muslims, and endeavours to protect the privileges of (traditionally white) non-Muslim British people against real and imagined demands for Muslim recognition.

Adrian Tudway's assessment that Muslims should consider engaging with the EDL indicates a broader problem. The group's analysis of Muslims and Islam is not considered extremist precisely because it is not particularly 'extreme' to hold such views - they are articulated every day in newspapers, by government ministers and by think-tank intellectuals who all converge around the same theme: that Muslims in Britain are dangerous. In such a climate the soaring popularity of the group and the dramatic spike in Islamophobic hate crimes following the Woolwich attack (Wright et al. 2013) should come as no surprise. The English Defence League are indeed a symptom; not, as they claim, of 'Islamic extremism', but of the increasingly socially acceptable discourse of 'problematic Muslims'. The challenge posed by the group is therefore not simply to quell its violence or confront the more caustic elements of its protests. Rather, it requires deep reflection and confrontation of the entrenched societal Islamophobia that makes such a movement possible.

Note

After a series of hacking attacks *EDL News* migrated to a new website. The links provided below reflect the new web addresses of the articles cited. The content remains unchanged.

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