



## Book Review

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## Book Review

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JM Moore

At a time when nativist, neo-fascist and overtly racist groups are on the rise in Euro-America, an understanding of what motivates those involved is potentially valuable. Two very different recent books, both focusing on the English Defence League (EDL), claim to provide such insights: *Loud and Proud: Passion and politics in the English Defence League (LAP)* by Hilary Pilkington and *The Rise of the Right: English nationalism and the transformation of working-class politics (ROTR)* by Simon Winlow, Steve Hall and James Treadwell. Whilst there is undoubted value in researching the far right it is always important to maintain perspective. The EDL has always been a small and marginal group which was, at the time these books were written, already in decline. Its significance must not be overstated. Most importantly we need to realise that the real rise of the right has occurred elsewhere, both within mainstream political parties and, more significantly, behind the net curtains of respectable Middle England. For those looking to understand Brexit, the participants described in these books may seem the appropriate scapegoats. In fact, as Danny Dorling (2016) has highlighted, 59% of leave voters were middle class and it was southern England that provided the majority of leave voters. These middle-class voters are subject to many of the same forces and ideas that influence EDL members. They will have absorbed the same ideology of racial superiority that characterises post-imperial white Britain. They are also exposed to the daily propaganda of the media, as well as experiencing increased economic insecurity. It says something about the priorities of social science researchers that this group escapes even a fraction of the attention received by the very few members of the working class active within the EDL. In the same way that elites use racialised populations to deflect attention away from the real causes of inequality and austerity, there is a danger that researchers' focus on the EDL deflects attention from growing middle class support for far-right ideologies.

Nevertheless, it is the EDL which is the focus of these two books. Awarded the Radio 4 *Thinking Aloud* Ethnography Award 2017, LAP is a model ethnographic study. The book includes a detailed account of Pilkington's method and the data she collected. It draws on a 136,000-word field diary (p. 14); her attendance at 20 EDL demos, 5 divisional meetings and observations of 4 days of crown court trial (pp. 232-233). In total Pilkington undertook 31 interviews (p. 15); engaged with and observed her participants on social media (p. 16); and compiled an archive of 593 photos & 130 video clips (p. 16). The book is based on 39 key respondents (p. 16), with the demographic details of 35 of them set out in an appendix (pp. 234-7). Despite suffering serious health issues whilst conducting the research, Pilkington observed her participants engaged in EDL activity. These allow LAP to provide a valuable insight into how the EDL operates and chart its participants trajectories into and out of activism. It becomes clear that Pilkington developed a close relationship with those she

researched and that this allowed her to explore their activism in the context of “a complex net of local environment and personal psychodynamics and family dynamics” (p. 74).

For Pilkington “uncomfortable views, and those who expressed them, have to be treated seriously, academically and politically, rather than dismissed, caricatured or ridiculed” (p. 1). As an ethnographic study this presents a practical challenge. How do you react to these “uncomfortable views”, particularly when discussions focus on ‘race’ and migration? For Pilkington “it was appropriate to correct statements that were blatantly inaccurate” (p. 29), and to be open with her respondents about her own, Labour Party supporting, politics (p. 26). Whilst seeking to share respondents “stories as they have told them” (p. 30), Pilkington subjects them to analysis and critical evaluation. Whilst the reader of LAP may be exposed to racist and other far right discourses, these are contextualised and evaluated. Research showing “Muslim communities are well integrated” into British society (p. 7) and that “Pakistanis and Bangladeshis are the most deprived social groups in the UK” (p. 163) highlight for the reader the fundamental untruth of EDL discourses.

The methodology of ROTR is very different. Although it claims to be ethnographic, it is in many ways more of a polemic than an academic book. The research participants are absent from the opening chapters, which focus on setting out the authors’ political analysis of contemporary Britain. This was based on highly problematic reporting of recent history. For example, despite the book being written in 2015, the year of a British general election dominated by the issues of EU membership and migration, Winlow *et al.* claim that “concerns about nationhood, culture and the threat posed by immigrants” were being “vigilantly avoided by the major political parties” (p. 40). We are told, as a matter of fact, that the “political establishment no longer speaks to the experiences hopes and dreams of *ordinary* people and dismisses *all* their fears (p. 2, emphasis added). Later it is asserted that “the traditional communist and socialist left seemed to disappear into thin air in the 1960s” (p. 47) and that the Occupy movement is not “against the system in which the bankers thrive” (p. 68), claims made without any supporting evidence or citations. Likewise, the authors claim that intersectionality has “ripped apart potential class solidarity” (p. 65), this at a time when “the white working class’s economic function (has) slipped into a condition of historical redundancy” (p.71). This then, is the historical scene that is set by the time we hear from the first identified participant, David, introduced on page 86. Unlike LAP, which presents us with research data from participants and then utilises the academic literature to analysis and evaluate the participants’ perspective, ROTR starts with its own political analysis and uses research data to support this perspective. This focus, on the polemic rather than the participants, means we are told little about ROTR’s method and there is no evidence in the book of any field observations. It appears participants were identified through a snowballing approach whereby, for example “one of our most important guides”, David, “introduced us to others” (p. 86). The interviews appear to have been informal and the only indication of where they took place is when it is reported that “(a)n amicable evening in the pub could quite quickly turned around as soon as immigration was raised” (p. 107).

Both books seek to engage with the racism that is at the heart of the EDL. Unlike organisations like the National Front (NF) and the British National Party (BNP) the EDL denies the centrality of racism to its mission. In ROTR all contacts, we are told “maintain that they are not racist in any generic sense of the term” (p. 96). Similar claims to non-racism are made by Pilkington’s participants. However, as she perceptively identifies, central to these claims “is the appeal to a simple narrow, definition of ‘race’ and racism” (p. 123). Whereas Pilkington’s analysis is set in the context of theoretical debates about ‘race’, racism and post

racialism (p. 11), Winlow *et al.* appear to have not engaged with this literature. For them the root cause of racism lies with those who have been racialised. It is those “who compete against *us* for scarce resources” (p. 145, emphasis added), who are ultimately responsible for racism. The references throughout the book to the ‘white working class’ (the authors use this category far more than their respondents) are not accompanied by any analysis of the concept or appreciation that its construction as a constituency is “predominantly an elite affair” (Shilliam, 2018: 133). This analysis of ‘them’ and ‘us’ leads Winlow *et al.* to conclude tolerance is, in some circumstances, unreasonable. They ask:

How can cultural groups tolerate each other when they are compelled to struggle every day with the snakes-and-ladders logic of ceaseless economic competition? ... Should the traditional working class look on with openness and acceptance as other cultural groups challenge their economic interests and prompt their downward economic mobility and social humiliation? (p.142)

In a society that is structurally racist and where racist hate is a daily experience, we are told that “(t)he skin colour of a colleague becomes insignificant if *they* join *us* in a fight to end our shared suffering” (p. 143, emphasis added).

By grounding her research in the broader scholarship around ‘race’ and racism Pilkington is able to contextualise her findings. Whilst recognising that the discontent and resentment of her respondents is directly related to economic and social changes, she identifies how this loss is compounded by an (incorrect) belief that the privileges of whiteness have also been removed. By locating her respondents “in the context of societies where whiteness has historically conferred some sort of guarantee of belonging and entitlement” (p. 158) we can understand how the impact of their social and economic losses has become attributed to ‘race’. Nevertheless, Pilkington finds that many of the activists she researched apparently “demonstrate a genuine aspiration to non-racism” (p. 226). This tension, between a perceived loss of white privilege and a desire to avoid being racist, is resolved by a focus on the ‘immigrant’ or ‘Muslim’ Other. This allows the EDL to distinguish itself from other, white supremacist organisations. Indeed, as Pilkington points out the EDL has had “divisions for supporters who are Sikhs, Hindus, Jews and Greek/Cypriots as well as “long-standing women’s (‘Angels’), LGBT and Armed Forces divisions” (p. 43). The gay men, lesbian and bisexual women in LAP all “felt comfortable within the movement” (p. 122). The EDL members who participated in Pilkington’s research were not a homogenous group and did not conform to media stereotypes. Some were clearly struggling with the inherent contradiction of being ‘non-racist’ racists. Her capacity to get to know these individuals allows her to give us an intimate portrait of them as people, often experiencing very troubled lives characterised by poor mental health, experiences of child abuse, relationship breakdown, domestic violence, debt, and poverty. These biographies also help explain the sense of belonging they feel from their membership of the EDL.

Three of Pilkington’s participants were members of the Infidels group and were avowed “national socialists” (p. 217), one of whom, Andrew, “recounted his empathy for Anders Breivik” (p. 29). The inclusion of these three openly Fascists in her study has led to criticism of Pilkington, with for example, Hayes (2019: 260) arguing that these are people who are beyond the pale and for whom “condemnation *should* accompany analysis” (emphasis in the original). I found this critique a bit harsh. Clearly the EDL’s attempt to distinguish itself from other far right and racist groups is doomed to failure and anyone researching it seriously is likely to find, as Pilkington did, hard-core Fascists among its membership. Pilkington could

have excluded these three participants from her book, but this would have hidden the reality that the EDL provides a space for avowed Nazis to operate in. She chose to not pursue contact with the three Infidels members after she had interviewed them (p. 29). What we don't learn, therefore, is about their interaction with, influence on, or reception by, other EDL members despite their interview contributions being integrated into the book's wider narrative. This feels unsatisfactory and I was left wondering if the book would not have been stronger with a specific chapter on the implications of the Infidels involvement, not least on the EDL's self-proclaimed identity.

*Loud and Proud* provides a valuable insight into the lives of *some* of those who have experienced the growing inequality and structural changes that have characterised Britain over the last 50 years. Given how elites have sought to shift the blame onto the poor and the racialised it is unsurprising that some people will respond through EDL activism. Pilkington's book provides valuable insights into the lives and motivations of the EDL members she researched. She manages to successfully balance her sympathy for her participants as people, whilst remaining uncompromising in her critique of their politics. The polemic approach of *Rise of the Right* on the other hand means that not only were their research participants reduced to bit-part actors, deployed only when required to support the book's narrative, but that many of the myths that sustained the far right were left unchallenged. We learn very little about their research participants, the complexities of their lives and their trajectories into and out of far-right activism. Equally concerning is the failure to critique many of the claims of their participants. Indeed, at times these claims are accepted and presented as empirical fact. To take one of many examples:

As we have already seen, the consumer successes of younger Muslim populations angered many of our contacts. Again, their frustration stemmed from their inability to consume at a roughly equivalent level ... They wanted to buy fast cars and designer clothes, but they could not. When they saw recently arrived immigrants display the trappings of success, they bristled with indignation (p.163).

Whatever their respondents told them, this is not the daily reality experienced by Britain's Muslim community or the vast majority of migrants. Even minimal engagement with the extensive body of literature on the economic and social reality of contemporary life in Britain would have enabled these claims to be debunked as dangerous myths.

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