The English Defence League and the counter jihad

James Treadwell asks whether precariousness is a factor in extremist violence

Since the murderous shooting spree of Anders Behring Breivik in Norway in 2011, there has been a growing concern with what has been termed the counter jihad movement. This comprises a useful reconfiguration of debates about radicalisation that has re-positioned both the far right and Islamic extremism as similarly worrying phenomena. However, it remains the case that discussion of radicalisation and extremism still commonly separates off and segregates extremism into categories which are then considered as exclusive and distinct. Potentially discussions around what are viewed as the precarious, marginalised groups in society offer scope to consider instead the commonality of the contexts of exclusion, disempowerment and frustration that give rise to the UK's current manifestations of far-right extremism.

With the fragmentation of the traditional British far right (and particularly the British National Party) there has been a growing concern focused on the English Defence League (EDL), a street protest movement that has been involved in violent demonstrations in numerous cities (Garland and Treadwell, 2010). However, while the EDL have received increasing levels of academic attention, especially as they were cited as a potential inspiration for Breivik, there has been little empirical academic engagement with the EDL as an organisation (Treadwell and Garland, 2010). Just as, in the wake of the UK riots, we witnessed a very public proclamation that the disorder was 'criminality pure and simple (Treadwell et al., 2013), with considerably less consideration of its socio-economic and cultural drivers, many commentators have taken the emergence of the EDL, and their involvement in public disorder, as simply a problem with no obvious cause (Busher, 2012). In both cases, political leaders display an orientation against deeper understanding of the social, political and cultural drivers of disorder and have actively purged any discussion of those from the public discourse. Any attempts to offer explanations of where social action emerges from, of how it develops as a response to circumstances with a far broader reach than just the actors themselves, are quickly sidelined (as if explaining were condoning) in favour of simple condemnatory pronouncements.

Understanding what drives anger

The drivers of the anger of the street protesting EDL members are in need of critical understanding. Garland and Treadwell's ethnographic study of core supporters of the EDL seeking to bring their motivations to light, suggests that they are driven by a precariousness they feel envelops them; 'a sense of relative deprivation [and the] anger, anomie, anxiety and alienation, which stems from frustration at blocked avenues for advancing a meaningful life' (Standing, 2011). Time and again we have heard of personal defeats, experiences of victimisation, humiliation. Marginalisation and frustration form the context of a hatred that can become manifest in explosions of targeted violence (Treadwell and Garland, 2011). This is borne out of the reality of lives lived aggressively and competitively against a backdrop of ever growing social precariousness; such concepts both characterise the social and cultural context of the EDL and the very real, nasty and visceral violence that can be perpetrated by its more active supporters (ibid).

Understanding what drives these individuals (admittedly the exceptional minority) onto the streets and, in some cases, into deliberate violent victimisation of others (mostly, though by no means exclusively, young Islamic men), should rightly be the focus of research. Moreover, we perhaps ought to recognise that, when it comes to mobilising numbers on the streets it is the EDL's clamour for recognition, crudely articulated through racist and often violent Islamophobic language and behaviour, resonates with *some* (and of course by no means all) disengaged, disenfranchised and resentful sections of what would once have been termed the white working class. This identity crisis, caused ultimately by precariousness and buffeted by socio-economic insecurity is most deeply problematic when it advances beyond simply articulated

Marginalisation and frustration form the context of a hatred that can become manifest in explosions of targeted violence

Just as the EDL socially represent anxious lives lived on the precipice, so too are those that they target as rivals

resentment and becomes physical, targeted hate violence. More generally, it creates a climate of hostility in some disadvantaged communities which experience very segregated existences even as they live cheek by jowl.

Frustrations and otherness

It is also interesting how frequently the specific issues that are highlighted by the EDL relate to criminal justice and, more specifically, frustrations at the criminal justice system, which run from the macro level of government policy to the micro level of personal perceptions of mistreatment, such as differential treatment of EDL members. Accordingly, their grievances run a range of concerns that converge around a core concern: the dangerous Muslim 'other'. Since 9/11 and 7/7 (and most recently in Woolwich in May this year) Islamic communities in the UK have become connected with deeper anxieties about Britain's growing diversity and apparent loss of a cohesive identity: this is in part the more widespread and common context of the emergence of the EDL.

A great unspoken is that the group being 'othered', the Islamic community, are themselves all too frequently united in a similar precariousness that cuts invidiously across both communities. Just as the EDL socially represent anxious lives lived on the precipice, so too are those that they target as rivals. Muslim communities similarly represent some of the most deprived communities in the UK. It has been suggested that approximately a third of Muslims of working age have no qualifications (the highest proportion for any distinct faith group). Muslim children score highly for risk factors associated with child poverty; they

more commonly live in crowded accommodation in households without central heating. Over one third are growing up in households which are amongst the most disadvantaged faith group in the British labour market, with Bangladeshis and Pakistanis being 2.5 times more likely than the white population to be unemployed and 3 times more likely to be in low paid jobs. They are similarly over represented in the prison system, making up around 3 per cent of the general population but 9 per cent of the prison population (Briggs and Birdwell, 2009).

While the EDL seem to believe that the police dare not interfere with the Islamic community, that the criminal justice system is stifled by a desire to avoid community tensions and is over respectful of ethnic sensitivities, the bulk of the evidence runs to the contrary. Of course, in this respect, the EDL are not alone: their concerns frequently both stem from and mirror those anxiety-filled stories of the tabloid press that castigate a criminal justice system perceived to be soft, liberal and illogical. The truth is inevitably much more complex. Rather than the experience of marginalisation generating a common agenda to action, in similarly disadvantaged communities there is a tendency to target what is seen as 'other'. A good example is the recent jailing of the Birmingham terrorist cell who planned to target the EDL in Dewsbury. What unites precarious groups as a collective and integrates a remarkably variegated collective of individuals into a cohesive category, is the similarity of their condition.

The drivers that unite them in common condition push them apart in experience

Yet these common sufferings do not add up: they divide and separate. They deny commonality as appeals to solidarity sound ludicrous. The 'precariat' rounds upon one another, and the drivers that unite them in common condition push them apart in experience. This results, ultimately, in a futile process of mutual intolerance and disdain, which is particularly perpetuated amongst the most marginalised elements of each group. ■

Dr James Treadwell is Lecturer in Criminology, University of Birmingham

References

Busher, J. (2012), 'There are none sicker than the EDL: Narratives of racialization and resentment from Whitehall and Eltham, London', in Briggs, D. (ed.), *The English Riots of 2011 A Summer of Discontent*, Winchester: Waterside Press.

Briggs, R. and Birdwell, J. (2009), *Radicalisation among Muslims in the UK,* MICROCON Policy Working Paper 7, Brighton: MICROCON.

Garland, J. and Treadwell, J. (2010), 'No Surrender to the Taliban': Football Hooliganism, Islamophobia and the Rise of the English Defence League, Papers from the British Criminology Conference, 10(1), pp. 19-35.

Standing, G. (2011), *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*, London: Bloomsbury.

Treadwell, J., Briggs, D., Winlow, S. and Hall, S. (2013), 'Shopocalypse Now: Consumer Culture and the English Riots of 2011', *British Journal of Criminology*, 53(1), pp. 1-17.

Treadwell, J. and Garland, J. (2011). 'Masculinity, Marginalisation and Violence: A Case Study of the English Defence League', *British Journal of Criminology*, 51(4), pp. 621-634.