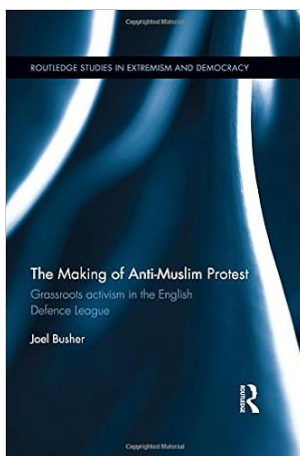


The Making of Anti-Muslim Protest – Grassroots Activism in the English Defence League

by Esmerelda Weatherwax (February 2016)



[Coventry University website](#) 'My particular research interest is in the micro-social processes through which people achieve, or are frustrated in their attempts to achieve, sustained mobilisations, and how understanding these processes can inform policy and practice'.

To research and write this book he spent 16 months in 2011-2012 shadowing leaders and members of March for England and the Essex and London divisions of the EDL across meetings, socials, demonstrations and other events. Dr Busher and I met and talked; once formally after the circumstances he described on Page 85, informally on several further occasions.



His recording of events is factual, accurate and objective. We stood near each other at many of the same events and what he describes accords with what I also saw. I am therefore confident that when he describes something that I did not witness his report is equally accurate. I should expect no less from a serious academic writing a scientific academic study. Unfortunately I also have

experience of others (not academics, but certainly men and women with professional qualifications who should know better) who are less scrupulous so when I do meet honesty and integrity I am inclined to praise it.

There was one particular meeting he describes which is not one I was ever likely to attend, but about which I thought 'I'd like to be a fly on the wall at that one'. Dr Busher was that fly and his description made interesting reading.

The book opens with a description of the demonstration in Dagenham in April 2011 which I also observed, although we did not meet until a few weeks later. It's a positive opening. He describes the good humour of the demonstrators, the minutes silence for the young man killed after the first demonstration, the respect given by the movement to Sikhs; and where there is matter worthy of criticism he reports that as well. He continues setting out the background to the EDL succinctly and accurately, giving due credit to the place of March for England and The Casuals in patriotic protest before 2009 and continuing thereafter.

This next bit caught my attention.

The discussion that I present is theoretically grounded in the idea that social movement activism, regardless of the cause around which people are mobilising comprises a project of collective "world-making", a concept that I have taken from Deborah Gould's (2009) landmark study of AIDS activism in the United States.

That definition is of the utmost importance because he uses the phrase 'world-making' frequently throughout the rest of the book. The previous occasion I had heard that phrase used (sometimes world-building) was as used among those who read, write and enjoy the genre of fantasy and or science fiction novels where a new world is invented within which to set not just one novel but a complete scene. Terry Pratchett's *Discworld* for example or Larry Niven's *Ringworld*.

The mechanics of world-making as described in this book sounds (to me) very similar to what I knew 40 years ago, when working with student feminist and women's groups but then we called it 'consciousness raising'. Relating things, incidents, facts, opinions held by others, pointing them out, making them known. Something I believe much of my work still is; point out the facts, encourage people to think about the implications.

Without that definition firmly in mind one might fear that Dr Busher views the experiences being shared as a fantasy land while outside in the real world our fears are groundless. The opposite is the case. As I said, this is a serious academic work and the introduction must not be skipped.

A relatively small point that I liked. The footnotes were not at the foot of each page as in some books where they can take on a life of their own and be longer than the page to which they are a note. Neither were they all at the back as in other books where you are trying to find Chapter 3 ~ footnote 32, and you then read footnote 32 of Chapter 13 and wonder why it makes no sense. The footnotes are at the back of each chapter, in a manner that reminded me (irreverently) of 1066 and All That. This made them easy to find and follow which is good because many of them contained material every bit as interesting as the main text.

This is a footnote I particularly liked '... Using the term "Islamophobic activism" would also I believe hint at a pathologisation of activists (phobias are irrational fears) that would be contrary to my aims in writing this book: I broadly agree with Bowen's (2005) assertion that the term islamophobia is more "polemical" than it is analytical...'.

Which I interpret to mean that 'Islamophobia' is a term of judgmental criticism, rather than scientific description, and thus not one that it is helpful to use.

There are chapters on how people joined the EDL, how the EDL operates as non-racist and not far-right. A very interesting chapter on how and why the EDL started to unravel but never completely did, followed by a chapter on its persistence. I won't precis each chapter.

I will mention one thing Dr Busher noticed and commends in several places, which is the absence in the EDL of what he calls 'bridge-burning'. This is correct and admirable. Unlike some groups he noticed what he described (Chapter 1 page 45) as 'the relative absence of social bridge burning on entry'. And later the same if and when people left.

Members of the EDL are not expected to abandon their previous life and friends when they join. As a young woman I witnessed the efforts of the then International Marxist Group to isolate and sweep up a shy and impressionable young man into their exclusive orbit. The memory of the morning a formidable

friend sent their minivan on its way without him (at 6am!) for a northern demo he had no desire to attend is one that has stayed with me. Dr Busher does not quote the saying prevalent among the most sensible activists of 'family first' but he does write that when the reason giving for leaving is for family commitments, that is the reason given the most respect. He further notes that when people leave they frequently stay friends with remaining members and (with one or two exceptions) continue to be welcome at social meets, even the occasional demo. The EDL is not a cult. I have always described it as like the Church of England, a broad church.

Activists do what they do for their families and they could not do what they do without their families behind them.

His conclusions are less about the future of the EDL per se and more about the need for continuing research into various groups and the cause of anti-minority activism.

I'm glad he wrote this book. It reminded me strongly of Young and Willmott ~ *Family and Kinship in East London*, although that book, researched and written 1954 – 1957, is more accessible to the general reader and students from GCSE level. If *Family and Kinship in East London* is the story of my early childhood then this book (2011 – 2013) covers aspects of my middle age. Leaving aside his research about activism generally this book should stand in 60 years time with *Family and Kinship in East London* as an historical document, an act of record for people and a movement in English history. It is far more rational, objective, impartial, accurate and scientific than anything else that I have read so far.

Interestingly, I see that *Family and Kinship in East London*, reprinted in 1986 is still available as a Penguin Modern classic and has been revived in 2011 by Routledge as one of their [here](#).

If you enjoyed this piece and would like to read more by Esmerelda Weatherwax, please click [here](#).

Esmerelda Weatherwax is a regular contributor to the Iconoclast, our community blog. To view her entries please click