

Extremism and toxic masculinity: the man question re-posed

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There are a hundred or so men, perhaps a couple of dozen women, and a lot of flags and banners. The marchers are flanked on all sides by more men, high-vis-clad police. Many sit on huge, powerful horses. The animals stomp in frustration, heads straining, breath clouding the air. I step back. The marchers are on the move now and chanting, ‘Muhammad is a paedo, Muhammad is a paedo!’ ‘Allah! Allah! Who the fuck is Allah!’ I catch sight of my respondent, who nods with a slight smile. Is this acknowledgement? Pride, ownership, display? He told me he wouldn’t want his kids at an event like this. But he looks as though he is having fun. Afterwards I catch up with the organizer, Ian Crossland, then national spokesman for the English Defence League. You’re speaking out against the sexual exploitation of local girls, I say. Protesting grooming gangs. Wouldn’t your message be more powerful without the offensive signs, the anti-Muslim rhetoric? The thing is, he says, the lads are angry, their blood is up, and this is how we express ourselves.

Field research notes, English Defence League (EDL) demonstration, Telford, 5 November 2016

What expression of masculinity is apparent here? How was I to understand this encounter, one moment in a wider research project to explore the function of gender in the contentious field of UK ‘extremism’?¹ In particular, how could this semi-ethnographic project engage a feminist analysis to understand the EDL, an anti-Islam(ist) movement, composed largely of men, in which an opposition to western feminism is an active driver in participation? Actors involved in protest against Islam and Islamism are increasingly designated in both media discourse and UK government policy as ‘extreme’, which is to say, opposing values of democracy, the rule of law and diversity of faith.² The EDL is a largely homosocial movement,³ and the men involved are also increasingly framed through a

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¹ The wider research project also engaged with British Islamists, such as Anjem Choudhary and others networked to him. In this piece I focus only on one particular radical right movement, the EDL.

² HM Government, *Counter-Extremism Strategy*, policy paper, 19 Oct. 2015, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/counter-extremism-strategy>.

³ Jamie Bartlett and Mark Littler, *Inside the EDL* (London: Demos, 2011), p. 5, https://www.demos.co.uk/files/Inside_the_edl_WEB.pdf; Hilary Pilkington, “‘EDL angels stand beside their men ... not behind them’: the politics of gender and sexuality in an anti-Islam(ist) movement”, *Gender and Education* 29: 2, 2017, pp. 238–57.

prism of ‘toxic masculinity’. This research explores ground firmly within what Zalewski and Stern have termed ‘the gender industry’, in which gender scholars are expected to produce ‘effective knowledge’ to influence policy, in this case, to counter extremism.⁴

My work began, therefore, with Zalewski, and her “‘man” question’. It is the question Zalewski first posed some 20 years ago as an invitation to ‘question the unquestionable’ and ‘problematize the subjecthood of man’.⁵ Following feminist scholarship, this constituted an attempt to reposition the focus of study from female subjectivities, with the aim of raising the prominence of gender in International Relations (IR).⁶ It was about understanding not ‘women’, but power relations. This article considers the lessons Zalewski’s question offers for understanding contemporary extremism—in particular, gender in the radical right. It charts, however, not what Zalewski imagined, an interrogation of masculinities, a making visible of gender in all its manifestations, but what she predicted: the reinstatement of existing masculinisms and the essentialization of masculinity in sex.⁷

Through exploration of the function of gender in the EDL, this article argues that current understandings of extremism demonstrate a neglect of Zalewski’s ‘man’ question in favour of questions of particular ‘masculinities’, toxic or crisis. Simplistic accounts of masculinities increasingly ‘fill the gaps’ in both understandings of extreme groups and policy to counter them (‘countering violent extremism’ or CVE). This article proceeds in two parts. First, it suggests the promise of Zalewski’s approach as a disruption of the essentialisms of ‘toxic masculinity’, outlining the genealogy of the term and briefly discussing its homogenizing effects in countering extremism. Second, through analysis of ‘close-up’ research with EDL activists, I explore two possible ways to enact instead the promise of the man question: one is to disrupt the idea of ‘toxicity’ as distinct from patriarchy, and recognize EDL masculinities as belonging to a repertoire of wider social norms; another is to disrupt the necessary link between men’s bodies and masculinities. This piece reflects on Zalewski’s relevance to the field of masculinities and the possibilities for deconstructing extremism, in order to emphasize her prescience. In each problematic encounter with gender and its effects in this field, Zalewski has thought there before.

Extremism is a sensitive issue, and I am aware of the risk of reproducing unpalatable and racist discourses, even as I seek to problematize them. Parpart and Zalewski note of their feminist interrogation of masculinity that ‘interrupting this stability while at the same time invoking its terms ... is ... tricky’.⁸ I make

(Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 7 Aug. 2019.)

⁴ Maria Stern and Marysia Zalewski, ‘Feminist fatigue(s): reflections on feminism and familiar fables of militarisation’, *Review of International Studies* 35: 3, 2009, p. 615.

⁵ Marysia Zalewski, ‘Introduction’, in Marysia Zalewski and Jane L. Parpart, eds, *The ‘man’ question in International Relations* (Boulder, CO: Routledge, 1997), pp. 8, 12.

⁶ Zalewski, ‘Introduction’; Jane L. Parpart and Marysia Zalewski, ‘Introduction: rethinking the man question’, in Jane L. Parpart and Marysia Zalewski, *Rethinking the man question: sex, gender and violence in International Relations* (London and New York: Zed, 2008).

⁷ Stern and Zalewski, ‘Feminist fatigue(s)’.

⁸ Parpart and Zalewski, ‘Introduction: rethinking the man question’, p. 2.

no claims to have succeeded in this aim in my discussion of the radical right. In particular, I use the term ‘extremism’, yet criticize its application to specific groups. I also include transcript material representative of the politics of the movement researched, and therefore likely offensive to many. These transcripts represent views which homogenize Islam and Muslims, and fail to recognize the diversity of Muslim experiences. I include this difficult ethnographic material for two reasons. First, researchers of the far and radical right, including Blee and Pilkington, emphasize the need for ‘close-up’ research with these often ‘distasteful’, ‘repugnant’ or ‘dangerous’ groups.⁹ This is particularly important, given that much work distances itself from the people involved, either through the adoption of pathologizing theoretical frameworks or through the use of online material, such as posts on social media.¹⁰ Indeed, the actions of the EDL are frequently collapsed into single explanatory factors, racism or toxicity. Instead I adopted an empathetic approach as part of an ethnographic methodology, which asserts the necessity of recognizing the legitimacy of the participant viewpoint, even where the view itself crosses the *cordon sanitaire* of acceptability.

Second, it is important that ethnographic research is evidenced through the inclusion of authentic voices from these mainly white working-class research participants. This inclusion is not gratuitous. The broader demographic of working-class British voices, whether they are white or people from ethnic minority groups,¹¹ is infrequently represented in academic literature, and often misrepresented in the mainstream.¹² In the contemporary UK context, both Bailey and Pilkington emphasize the need to avoid a normative approach which either homogenizes or condemns the experiences of those who hold ‘radical’ political positions.¹³ Views of those in ‘extreme’ but ‘marginalized’ groups (some might argue, self-marginalized) are frequently judged against a white middle-class liberalism and regarded as exceptional, rather than as a manifestation of wider social discourse. Too often they are analysed only in order to be condemned—indeed, not to condemn can risk academic censure.¹⁴ I do not share the views of interviewees whose words I reproduce here. They all knew this. But I did listen, and this piece is about them. There are many victims of their views. Documentation of the impacts of EDL

⁹ Kathleen M. Blee, ‘Ethnographies of the far right’, *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 36: 2, 2007, pp. 119–28; Hilary Pilkington, *Loud and proud: passion and politics in the English Defence League* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016); Johanna Esseveld and Ron Eyerman, ‘Which side are you on? Reflections on methodological issues in the study of “distasteful” social movements’, in Mario Diani and Ron Eyerman, eds, *Studying collective action* (London: Sage, 1992), pp. 217–18, cited in Pilkington, *Loud and proud*, p. 13.

¹⁰ Pilkington, *Loud and proud*, p. 13.

¹¹ See guidance on the appropriate terms from the UK Government style guide: <https://guide.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/a-z>.

¹² Bev Skeggs, ‘The making of class and gender through visualizing moral subject formation’, *Sociology* 39: 5, 2005, pp. 965–82; Pilkington, *Loud and proud*; Owen Jones, *Chavs: the demonization of the working class* (London: Verso, 2012); Selina Todd, *The people: the rise and fall of the working class, 1910–2010* (London: John Murray, 2014).

¹³ Gavin Bailey, ‘Extremism, community and stigma: researching the far right and radical Islam in their context’, in Kalwant Bhopal and Ross Deuchar, eds, *Researching marginalized groups* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), pp. 22–4; Pilkington, *Loud and proud*, p. 1.

¹⁴ Konrad Kellen, ‘Ideology and rebellion: terrorism in West Germany’, in Walter Reich and Walter Laqueur, eds, *Origins of terrorism: psychologies, ideologies, theologies, states of mind*, new edn (Washington DC, Baltimore and London: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1998), pp. 43–59, at p. 47.

racism is vitally important.¹⁵ This piece, however, is focused on EDL activists, following the methods of other authors investigating the far and radical right,¹⁶ and indeed moving away from the criminological norm of attempting to understand racial or religious hate crime through a 'victimological perspective', rather than engaging with the processes through which hate or racism is engendered.¹⁷

My own position clearly features in this reflexive research, although there is not the space here for a comprehensive account. The fact that I am a white middle-class woman academic who used to work for the BBC and who, for instance, voted Remain in the Brexit referendum, was a source first of suspicion, mistrust or abuse, and then—for those who engaged—of light-hearted mockery. I challenged participants on their views and they challenged me on mine. Following Nayak,¹⁸ I aimed to go beyond the 'tropes of masculinity' associated with these working-class actors. So, as Zalewski entreats us to question the unquestionable,¹⁹ here I seek to confront the unconfontable. I do so for two reasons: in order to further existing knowledge at a time of social precariousness, and to ask, using Zalewski's man question as a guide: what work does gender do in structuring anti-Islam(ist) masculinities?

Part one: from 'man' question to toxic 'masculinity': a genealogy

It is more than 20 years since Zalewski and feminist scholars posed the 'man question' in IR, repositioning the attention from female subjectivities to the problematization of men. At the centre of this question was the rendering of women's visibility within politics and IR. The 'woman' question had not succeeded in moving women from the margins of IR. Now, it was hoped, 'another approach' would produce a different result. This was not about relegating feminism or women within gendered methodologies; the man question was squarely targeted at destabilizing IR as a masculinist field, asserting the significance of gendered relations, of gender as power. The question drew attention to patriarchy and to gendered practices; it emphasized structural inequalities, but also women's subjectivities. In essence, it considered questions of agency and identity as enmeshed in those of structure, and it constituted a means of challenging the inertia of a field which

¹⁵ See e.g. the work of the TellMAMA Team, 'TellMAMA: about us', 2018, <https://tellmamauk.org/about-us/>.

¹⁶ See e.g. Pilkington, *Loud and proud*; Pete Simi, 'Why study white supremacist terror? A research note', *Deviant Behavior* 31: 3, 2010, pp. 251–73; Mark Hamm, 'Apocalyptic violence: the seduction of terrorist subcultures', *Theoretical Criminology* 8: 3, 2004, pp. 323–39; Blee, 'Ethnographies of the far right'; Michael Kimmel and Abby L. Ferber, "'White men are this nation": right-wing militias and the restoration of rural American masculinity', *Rural Sociology* 65: 582–604, 2000; Bailey, 'Extremism, community and stigma'; Joel Busher, *The making of anti-Muslim protest: grassroots activism in the English Defence League* (London and New York: Routledge, 2015). My work on Islamist extremism adopts a parallel methodology, focusing on actors rather than victims, and engaging with participants' accounts of their pathways into 'extreme' groups through field research.

¹⁷ Benjamin Bowling and Coretta Phillips, *Racism, crime and justice* (Harlow: Pearson, 2002), cited in James Treadwell and Jon Garland, 'Masculinity, marginalization and violence: a case study of the English Defence League', *British Journal of Criminology* 51: 4, 2011, pp. 621–2.

¹⁸ See Anoop Nayak, 'Displaced masculinities: chavs, youth and class in the post-industrial city', *Sociology* 40: 5, 2006, pp. 813–31.

¹⁹ Zalewski, 'Introduction', p. 12.

had failed to see women adequately or engage with the question of gender as a core endeavour.²⁰

The prescience of Zalewski's man question and the reframing of the gender perspective that it embodied soon became apparent. In 2001, the events of 9/11 catalysed what some insisted was a 'new age' of global terrorism.²¹ Ten years after first asking the question, Parpart and Zalewski therefore re-posed the man question as imperative to understanding the increased 'virility' of the post-9/11 age. Its relevance was greater than ever. Masculinities—and, in particular, masculinisms—still structured IR.²² For Eisenstein, 9/11 and the US response in the 'war on terror' were evidence of a 'manly moment'.²³ The United States had mobilized gendered and racialized narratives instrumentalizing women's rights to justify military action in Afghanistan.²⁴ The evident effects of 9/11 in the international system meant that other national counterterrorism responses across the globe replicated these gendered logics.²⁵ In the UK, a state counter-extremism programme called the 'Prevent' strategy was launched in 2006–2007 to counter (Islamist) radicalization. This reproduced assertions familiar from the 'war on terror' of Muslim men as a suspect and risky community.²⁶ Brown notes that Prevent's maternalist engagement of Muslim women as mothers complemented the transactional paternalism of state projects aimed at protecting society from Muslim 'others'. Also, deradicalization programming acted to emasculate particular (Muslim) men, and radicalization was framed as a relegated and dangerous masculinity.²⁷ Although much discussion of masculinity has focused on socio-structural factors and the discursive production of masculinities, Amar has observed that racialized discussions of 'toxic' masculinity linked to (Islamist) extremism have enabled the deliberate neglect of the structural conditions producing particular identities and behaviours.²⁸ In their re-posing of the man question, Parpart and Zalewski noted that gendered relations still structured the global order in ways that enabled both structural and martial violence, which they recognized as 'toxic'.²⁹

Another ten years on, 'toxicity' has a fresh resonance for a new age of populism, informed by the events of 9/11. A Google search of the terms 'far right' and 'toxic

²⁰ Zalewski, 'Introduction'.

²¹ Bruce Hoffman, *Inside terrorism*, 2nd rev. edn (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006); Peter Neumann, *Old and new terrorism* (Cambridge, UK, and Malden, MA: Polity, 2009).

²² Kathy E. Ferguson, 'Interpretation and genealogy in feminism', *Signs* 16: 2, 1991, pp. 322–39; Parpart and Zalewski, 'Introduction: rethinking the man question', p. 2.

²³ Zillah Eisenstein, *Against empire: feminisms, racism and the West* (London: Zed, 2004), p. 161.

²⁴ Jasbir K. Puar and Amit S. Rai, 'Monster, terrorist, fag: the war on terrorism and the production of docile patriots', *Social Text* 20: 3, 2002, pp. 117–48; Laura J. Shepherd, 'Veiled references: constructions of gender in the Bush administration discourse on the attacks on Afghanistan post-9/11', *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 8: 1, 2006, pp. 19–41.

²⁵ Katherine E. Brown, 'Gender and counter-radicalization: women and emerging counter-terror measures', in Jayne Huckerby and Margaret L. Satterthwaite, eds, *Gender, national security and counter-terrorism* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2013).

²⁶ Naaz Rashid, 'Giving the silent majority a stronger voice? Initiatives to empower Muslim women as part of the UK's "war on terror"', *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 37: 4, 2014, pp. 589–604; Brown, 'Gender and counter-radicalization'.

²⁷ Brown, 'Gender and counter-radicalization', p. 48.

²⁸ Paul Amar, 'Middle East masculinity studies: discourses of "men in crisis", industries of gender in revolution', *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 7: 3, 2011, p. 36.

²⁹ Parpart and Zalewski, 'Introduction: rethinking the man question', pp. 3–4.

masculinity' apparently yields thousands of results, and headlines such as 'How the far right feeds on male insecurity'. A discourse of toxic masculinity applied to Muslim men during the 'war on terror' is increasingly used to locate responsibility for Islamophobia-as-extremism with a new 'subordinate' man, and is instituted in policy. A growing literature explores the idea of reciprocity to suggest an equivalence in the gender norms and drivers of the two movements, though so far there is little evidence for this.³⁰ British politicians and analysts have repeatedly linked a 'crisis of masculinity' and toxicity to 'extremist' violence.³¹ From 2011, when Prevent began to engage with the far right, the strategy drew parallels between those actively supporting extreme right and Islamist ideologies, through an invocation of the hallmarks of subordinate and toxic males, ignoring those men not described by this characterization. In both movements, Prevent states, actors were 'usually male, poorly educated (although there are some cases of high-achieving individuals) and often unemployed'.³² Policy-makers typified extremism as a problem of the 'low-achieving', effectively discounting explanations of male violence that did not feature educational, familial or economic dysfunction. The effect is the 'toxification' of masculinities in communities understood as 'extreme'.

At the same time, policy began to characterize anti-Islam sentiment as 'extremism'.³³ Yet, Baroness Warsi noted that Islamophobia was becoming increasingly accepted in public discourse,³⁴ and distinctions between state security policies, Islamophobic discourse and discussion of multiculturalism were blurred. Nonetheless, rather than focusing on the ubiquity of societal Islamophobia, or its role in paternalist state security policies, the idea of toxicity is employed to

³⁰ See for instance Julia Ebner, *The rage: the vicious circle of Islamist and far-right extremism* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2017), p. 10, https://www.amazon.co.uk/Rage-Vicious-Islamist-Far-Right-Extremism-ebook/dp/B0746HD6R6/ref=sr_1_2?ie=UTF8&qid=1527613467&sr=8-2&keywords=the+rage; Ashley A. Mattheis and Charlie Winter, "The greatness of her position": comparing identitarian and jihadi discourses on women' (International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence, 2019); Matthew Feldman, 'From radical-right Islamophobia to "cumulative extremism"' (Faith Matters, 2012), http://www.safecampuscommunities.ac.uk/uploads/files/2016/08/faith_matters_islamophobia_report_requires_upload.pdf; and Gavin Bailey, 'Widening extremism: definitions in the era of "cumulative extremism"', (22nd International Conference of Europeanists, Ces, 2015), <https://ces.confex.com/ces/2015/webprogram/Paper9553.html> on expanding definitions.

³¹ See e.g. Diane Abbott, 'Britain's crisis of masculinity', Demos twentieth birthday lecture (London, 2013); David Lammy, 'Islamists, gangs, the EDL—all target alienated young men', *Guardian*, 24 May 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/uk/2013/may/24/islamists-gangs-edl-target-young-men>; Joan Smith, *Home grown: how domestic violence turns men into terrorists* (London: riverrun, 2019); Joan Smith, 'How toxic masculinity is tied to terrorism', *UnHerd*, 16 May 2019, <https://unherd.com/2019/05/how-toxic-masculinity-is-tied-to-terrorism/>.

³² Home Office, 'Prevent strategy' (Norwich: Home Office, 2011), p. 21, https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/97976/prevent-strategy-review.pdf. This is a depiction of violence that is not broadly evidenced in the literature.

³³ Chris Allen, 'Why Theresa May is wrong to suggest that Islamophobia is a form of extremism', *HuffPost UK*, 20 June 2017, http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/dr-chris-allen/islamophobia_b_17214242.html; Alan Travis, 'May says Islamophobia is a form of extremism, marking shift in rhetoric', *Guardian*, 19 June 2017, <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/jun/19/may-says-islamophobia-form-extremism-marking-shift-rhetoric>.

³⁴ David Batty, 'Lady Warsi claims Islamophobia is now socially acceptable in Britain', *Guardian*, 20 Jan. 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2011/jan/20/lady-warsi-islamophobia-muslims-prejudice>; Matthew Weaver, 'Lady Warsi: ministers fuelling Muslim radicalisation', *Guardian*, 16 June 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2015/jun/16/lady-warsi-ministers-fuelling-muslim-radicalisation>; Sayeeda Warsi, *The enemy within: a tale of Muslim Britain* (London: Allen Lane, 2017).

exceptionalize particular masculinities, not to interrogate broader manifestations of Islamophobia or the exclusionary effects of patriarchy *per se*.

The pernicious effects of the term 'toxic masculinity' can be traced to its genesis within the psychological literature on masculinities,³⁵ part of the broader literature of critical studies on men and masculinities (CSMM). Kupers suggests toxic masculinity is 'the constellation of socially regressive male traits that serve to foster domination, the devaluation of women, homophobia, and wanton violence'.³⁶ This definition is clearly linked to men's bodies, and is embedded in notions of male deviance, violence and marginalization. Toxicity is centrally related to three foundational concepts introduced by the influential masculinities scholar Raewyn Connell: hegemonic masculinity, itself formulated in relation to two other expressions of the masculine, as subordinate and marginalized.³⁷ Authors have studied men and masculinity since the 1950s;³⁸ however, it is Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity that has been most formative in understanding how particular masculinities dominate, and what masculinity means.³⁹ CSMM has relied on Butler's formulation of gender as performative and socially constructed.⁴⁰ Connell approaches masculinity through a socio-structural lens,⁴¹ suggesting it is 'a place in gender relations, the practices through which men and women engage that place in gender, and the effects of these practices in bodily experiences, personality and culture'.⁴² More recently, the plurality of masculinities has been acknowledged. Masculinities are relational, constructed in opposition to femininities, and enacted according to a hierarchy, in which certain masculinities are preferable to others.⁴³

The study of 'subordinate masculinities' has often been preoccupied with 'problem men', and has been formative in work on (male) crime and violence.⁴⁴ Kimmel, who has written extensively on politically radical masculinities, notes that 'all masculinities are not created equal'.⁴⁵ Within the extremism discourse, 'toxic' men are often the most marginalized, or subordinate, in terms of class

³⁵ Syed Haider, 'The shooting in Orlando, terrorism or toxic masculinity (or both?)', *Men and Masculinities* 19: 5, 2016, pp. 555–65.

³⁶ Terry A. Kupers, 'Toxic masculinity as a barrier to mental health treatment in prison', *Journal of Clinical Psychology* 61: 6, 2005, p. 714.

³⁷ R. W. Connell, 'The social organization of masculinity', in Stephen M. Whitehead and Frank J. Barrett, eds, *The masculinities reader* (Oxford: Polity, 2001), pp. 38–41; Raewyn W. Connell, *Gender and power: society, the person and sexual politics* (Cambridge: Polity, 1987).

³⁸ Stephen M. Whitehead and Frank J. Barrett, 'The sociology of masculinity', in Whitehead and Barrett, eds, *The masculinities reader*, p. 15; Chris Beasley, *Gender and sexuality: critical theories, critical thinkers* (London and Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2005), p. 179.

³⁹ Raewyn W. Connell, *Masculinities* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995); Victoria Foster, Michael Kimmel and Christine Skelton, 'What about the boys?', in Wayne Martino and Bob Meyenn, eds, *What about the boys? An overview of debates* (London: McGraw-Hill Education UK, 2001).

⁴⁰ Judith Butler, *Gender trouble: feminism and the subversion of identity*, new edn (New York: Routledge, 2006); Judith Butler, 'Your behavior creates your gender', *Big Think*, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bo7o2LYATDc>.

⁴¹ R. W. Connell, 'Encounters with structure', *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 17: 1, 2004, pp. 10–27.

⁴² Connell, *Masculinities*, p. 71.

⁴³ Connell, *Gender and power*.

⁴⁴ James W. Messerschmidt, *Masculinities and crime: critique and reconceptualization of theory* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1993).

⁴⁵ Michael Kimmel, 'Integrating men into the curriculum', *Duke Journal of Gender Law and Policy* 4: 1, 1997, pp. 181–96.

or race, or both.⁴⁶ However, the discourse has frequently failed to understand the complexities of the relationship between subordination, context and power. There are four key reasons for this, found in critiques of Connell's initial conceptualization.⁴⁷ First, initial work on masculinities failed to take adequate account of intersectional issues of class, race or identities beyond the global North.⁴⁸ It also occluded differences of sexuality and how these act to produce masculinities and femininities.⁴⁹ Second, among the difficulties Flood identifies in Connell's use of the term masculinity is slippage between 'cultural/moral leadership' (a description of what constitutes dominant manhood) and 'empirical reference specifically to actual groups of men'.⁵⁰ The latter observation matters in discussion of 'subordinate' masculinity, often associated with groups of particular men. Third, Beasley suggests women are too absent from Connell's accounts of masculinity, which fails to recognize women's roles in either constituting masculinity or embodying it.⁵¹

Finally, Connell's structural approach 'lets men off the hook', Beasley suggests, by relegating male agency or identity in its account.⁵² In particular, for Connell, widespread violence—such as waves of Islamist resistance—has 'crisis tendencies'.⁵³ Here there is a risk of eliding the specificities of the local. In fact, a 'crisis of masculinity' has been repeatedly invoked for more than a hundred years, and in a variety of global contexts.⁵⁴ It is problematic because it universalizes gender experiences, portraying men in crisis, Asher suggests, as a 'homogeneous mass ... posited in relation to equally theoretical self-assured females'.⁵⁵ Yet it is within the contemporary 'crisis' discourse that toxic masculinity has become a vessel for particular forms of crisis, including extremism. There can be no 'crisis' of masculinity without a norm from which the crisis deviates;⁵⁶ toxicity has become

⁴⁶ Amar, 'Middle East masculinity studies'.

⁴⁷ Raewyn W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt, 'Hegemonic masculinity: rethinking the concept', *Gender and Society* 19: 6, 2005, pp. 829–59; Rachel Jewkes, Robert Morrell, Jeff Hearn, Emma Lundqvist, David Blackbeard, Graham Lindegger, Michael Quayle, Yandisa Sikweyiya and Lucas Gottzén, 'Hegemonic masculinity: combining theory and practice in gender interventions', *Culture, Health and Sexuality* 17: sup2, 2015, pp. 112–27; Christine Beasley, 'Rethinking hegemonic masculinity in a globalizing world', *Men and Masculinities* 11: 1, 2008, pp. 86–103; Beasley, *Gender and sexuality*.

⁴⁸ Jewkes et al., 'Hegemonic masculinity'.

⁴⁹ Jack Halberstam, *Female masculinity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012); Beasley, *Gender and sexuality*; Gayle S. Rubin, 'Thinking sex: notes for a radical theory of the politics of sexuality', in *Deviations: A Gayle Rubin Reader* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

⁵⁰ Michael Flood, 'Between men and masculinity: an assessment of the term "masculinity" in recent scholarship on men' in Sharyn Pearce and Vivienne Muller, eds, *Manning the next millennium: studies in masculinities* (Perth, Australia: Black Swan, 2002), cited in Beasley, 'Rethinking hegemonic masculinity in a globalizing world', p. 88.

⁵¹ Beasley, 'Rethinking hegemonic masculinity in a globalizing world'; Beasley, *Gender and sexuality*.

⁵² Beasley, *Gender and sexuality*, p. 229.

⁵³ Connell, 'The social organization of masculinity', p. 45.

⁵⁴ Judith A. Allen, 'Men interminably in crisis? Historians on masculinity, sexual boundaries, and manhood', *Radical History Review* 82: 1, 2002, pp. 191–207; Francis Dupuis-Déri, 'The bogus "crisis" of masculinity', *The Conversation*, n.d., <http://theconversation.com/the-bogus-crisis-of-masculinity-96558>; Rebecca Asher, *Man up: boys, men and breaking the male rules* (New York: Harvill Secker, 2016); John MacInnes, 'The crisis of masculinity and the politics of identity', in Whitehead and Barrett, *The masculinities reader*, pp. 1–29; Whitehead and Barrett, 'The sociology of masculinity'.

⁵⁵ Asher, *Man up*, p. 113.

⁵⁶ Mary Louise Roberts, 'Beyond "crisis" in understanding gender transformation', *Gender and History* 28: 2, 2016, pp. 358–66.

co-opted into extremism discourse as a rhetorical device. CSMM authors have linked masculinity in crisis to the macro-effects of globalization, suggesting that this is an explanatory factor across a spectrum of extremist ideologies. Authors have cited ‘crisis’ alongside ‘protest’ masculinities and emasculation as drivers in such groups, a common factor being a reassertion of male power in the face of changing gender norms.⁵⁷ Extremism discourses are constructed on the basis of such assertions and this is recognized by some as problematic. In their work on the EDL, Treadwell and Garland note that the structural emphasis of Connell’s early work fails to engage with men’s subjectivities. They suggest that socio-structural approaches risk pathologizing marginalized or subordinate men. Rather than relying on toxicity to explain broad structural issues for subordinate men, they advocate the approach favoured by Hood-Williams, ‘namely one which considers the psychological character of masculinity, in so far as masculinity is a kind of identity it must refer us to a study of the interior life of the person’.⁵⁸ However, it is Zalewski’s man question which, with its fundamental and relentless task of destabilizing and problematizing patriarchy, offers a path forward in the understanding and deconstructing of extremism.

Part two: ‘toxic’ masculinity as the promise of patriarchy: the EDL

The exceptionalism of particular men read as both extreme and toxic, and their framing as such in policy initiatives, does nothing to disrupt existing gendered relations, as Zalewski and Stern predicted. Rather, this exceptionalism enables discourses of ‘masculinity’ framing counter-extremism responses to amplify pre-existing power differentials, and shift the focus from patriarchy to the problem of particular men.⁵⁹ As Stern and Zalewski forewarned, ‘Masculinity tends also to become a (gender) “thing” which we have learned, understood, imported, conveyed, tried to change; more inflections of paradox. “Gender” becomes reduced to either “women”, “men”, or “femininity”, “masculinity”; and crucially we lose sight of the productive power involved.’⁶⁰ Current discussion leaves little room to see how masculinity is not simply a property of men’s bodies (it is also about women), with particular men responsible for extremist masculinities; nor does it acknowledge the ways in which toxicity is produced, not in particular men

⁵⁷ Michael S. Kimmel, ‘Globalization and its mal(e)contents: the gendered moral and political economy of terrorism’, *International Sociology* 18: 3, Sept. 2003, pp. 603–20; Raewyn W. Connell, ‘Globalisation, imperialism and masculinities’, in Michael S. Kimmel, Jeff R. Hearn and Robert W. Connell, eds, *Handbook of studies on men and masculinities* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2004), pp. 71–89; Raewyn Connell, ‘Masculinity research and global society’, in Esther Ngan-Ling Chow, Marcia Texler Segal and Lin Tan, *Analyzing gender, intersectionality, and multiple inequalities: global, transnational and local contexts*, ‘Advances in gender research’, vol. 15 (Bingley: Emerald Group, 2011), pp. 51–72; Kimmel and Ferber, “‘White men are this nation’”; Michael Kimmel, *Healing from hate: how young men get into—and out of—violent extremism* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2018); Michael Kimmel, *Angry white men: American masculinity at the end of an era*, rev. edn (New York: Bold Type, 2017).

⁵⁸ Treadwell and Garland, ‘Masculinity, marginalization and violence’, p. 624; John Hood-Williams, ‘Gender, masculinities and crime: from structures to psyches’, *Theoretical Criminology* 5: 37–60, 2001, pp. 39–40.

⁵⁹ Marysia Zalewski, *Feminist International Relations: exquisite corpse* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2013), pp. 92–9.

⁶⁰ Stern and Zalewski, ‘Feminist fatigue(s)’, p. 619.

because of who and what they are, but through a matrix of gendered relations produced in space and productive of that space.

This section draws on interviews carried out with EDL activists between 2016 and 2018, with the aims of further problematizing the ‘toxicity’ approach and outlining two possible paths along which to follow the ‘man’ question in research in this field.⁶¹ The first is to outline the ways in which EDL masculinities are part of wider social norms. The second is to disrupt the necessary link between men’s bodies and masculinities, considering women’s presence in the movement. In this section I explore the material ways in which race, gender and class intersect in local spaces to produce particular masculinities. This exploration suggests that the concept of toxic masculinity is inadequate to describe the gender practices of those involved in anti-Islam(ist) protest, and I advocate instead a return to the fundamentals of Zalewski’s man question to elucidate the complexity of masculinities in this scene.

Continuities: race, class and local masculinities

The EDL emerged in 2009 in Luton as an explicitly working-class street protest movement with a ‘single-issue’ focus: to oppose ‘global Islamification’.⁶² In particular, it was a response to poppy-burning protests by the Islamist preacher Anjem Choudary and other Al-Muhajiroun activists.⁶³ Some authors regard the EDL and other radical right groups with an anti-Islam(ist) agenda as simply fascism repackaged.⁶⁴ Feldman, for example, describes the EDL as ‘old wine in new bottles’, the ‘old racism’ of skin colour replaced with the ‘new cultural racism’ of faith.⁶⁵ Gattinara also suggests that assertions of cultural ‘incompatibility’ merely represent a narrative turning-point from assertions of racial inferiority.⁶⁶ Other authors suggest that the task of categorizing the EDL is more complex,⁶⁷ given its inclusivity towards women, Jewish people, Sikhs and gay people, all of whom are framed as (fellow) ‘marginalized’ groups in need of particular protection from Islam.⁶⁸ The EDL is also increasingly understood as part of a new wave of right-wing populism in Europe and the Americas focused on anti-immigration policies, particularly countering Islam.⁶⁹

⁶¹ Pseudonyms are used except for leadership figures who consented to being identified.

⁶² Pilkington, *Loud and proud*, pp. 37–8.

⁶³ Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens, *A neo-nationalist network—the English Defence League and Europe’s counter-jihad movement* (London: International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence, 2013).

⁶⁴ See Donald Holbrook and Max Taylor, ‘Introduction’, in Donald Holbrook, Max Taylor and P. M. Currie, eds, *Extreme right wing political violence and terrorism* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 2; John Meadowcroft and Elizabeth A. Morrow, ‘Violence, self-worth, solidarity and stigma: how a dissident, far-right group solves the collective action problem’, *Political Studies* 65: 2, 2017, pp. 373–90.

⁶⁵ Feldman, *From radical-right Islamophobia to ‘cumulative extremism’*, pp. 1, 10.

⁶⁶ Pietro Castelli Gattinara, *Research overview of far right narratives* (Radicalisation Awareness Network Publication, 2016), p. 3.

⁶⁷ See Bartlett and Littler, *Inside the EDL*; Pilkington, *Loud and proud*; Busher, *The making of anti-Muslim protest*.

⁶⁸ While I saw a small number of activists from ethnic minority groups at protests, I did not succeed in interviewing them.

⁶⁹ Ulrike M. Vieten and Scott Poynting, ‘Contemporary far-right racist populism in Europe’, *Journal of Inter-cultural Studies* 37: 6, 2016, pp. 533–40; Anoosh Chakelian, ‘Populist fascism is coming to the UK: who is fighting against it?’, *New Statesman*, 9 Aug. 2018, <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/uk/2018/08/popu>

Women have constituted perhaps 30 per cent of activists.⁷⁰ Busher, an ethnographer of the movement, notes that masculinity matters in the EDL, yet can often be reduced to pathologizing accounts, depicting men as ‘angry, white, damaged and vulnerable ... seeking to protect their social status and reassert their compromised masculinity’.⁷¹ There is a ‘kernel of truth’ to this, he admits. Toxicity as a pathologizing account neglects the ways in which care in EDL masculinities conforms with feminist scholars’ accounts of the linkages between nationalism, patriarchy and citizenship. For EDL activists, as for nationalists, male honour and national identity are located in the female body; there is an expectation that—white working-class—British women will be protected by the British state, as a form of covenant. Participants regarded this covenant as eroded. They saw themselves as ‘second-class citizens’ within a hierarchy of multiculturalism. In an inversion of Coomaraswamy’s suggestion that ‘during war [women’s] purity is deliberately assaulted precisely because it strikes at the core of ethnic identity’,⁷² participants reproduce cases of the mass sexual exploitation of ‘their’ women in ‘grooming’ cases as evidence of a culture war against them.⁷³

EDL masculinities were produced in the intersections of gender with race, poverty and class. Research participants described how violence that fell outside the accepted norms and racialized expectations of their community—participants suggested that fights should be ‘fair’, one-on-one for instance—could prove productive of new racialized masculinities. A racialized notion of the ‘fair fight’ featured in the account by ‘Daniel’ of confrontation with a group of (what he said were) Muslim men. ‘Daniel’ described a relationship of spatial proximity with, but existential distance from Muslim neighbours. This relationship was characterized by the permanent possibility of male violence, a broader feature of his environment. He is in his twenties, an EDL activist and a veteran of Iraq, but it was in his home town, he said, that he experienced his worst injury:

I was attacked by ten Muslims. [Q: What happened?] They were fiddling with my neighbours’ van and I ... went out and chased them. They called me a white bastard, and ... I confronted them—I had a pipe in my hand. [Q: A pipe?] I thought I needed a weapon, because they all had weapons. They ran into the shop on [X] street, hiding behind the counter, calling me a white bastard. They said, ‘It’s our town, we will do what we want.’ So, they stabbed me in the back.⁷⁴

list-fascism-coming-uk-who-fighting-against-it; Bartlett and Littler, *Inside the EDL*; Busher, *The making of anti-Muslim protest*; Pilkington, *Loud and proud*.

⁷⁰ Nigel Copsley, *The English Defence League: challenging our country and our values of social inclusion, fairness and equality* (London: Faith Matters, Nov. 2010), p. 29; Matthew Goodwin, *The roots of extremism: the English Defence League and the counter-jihad challenge*, briefing paper (London: Chatham House, 2013), p. 6, http://www.chatham-house.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/public/Research/Europe/0313bp_goodwin.pdf; Treadwell and Garland, ‘Masculinity, marginalization and violence’, p. 621; Bartlett and Littler, *Inside the EDL*, p. 14; Pilkington, ‘“EDL angels stand beside their men ... not behind them”’; Elizabeth Pearson, *To what extent does gender matter in extremism in the UK?*, PhD thesis (King’s College London, 2018).

⁷¹ Busher, *The making of anti-Muslim protest*, paras 51–2.

⁷² Radhika Coomaraswamy, ‘A question of honour: women, ethnicity and armed conflict’, Third Minority Rights Lecture, Geneva, 1999, <http://www.sacw.net/Wmov/RCoomaraswamyOnHonour.html>.

⁷³ But only those cases involving men framed as Muslim.

⁷⁴ Author’s interview with ‘Daniel’, 25 Aug. 2016.

‘Daniel’ told me only one of his attackers was arrested and jailed. For ‘Daniel’, this experience had a number of consequences: it destroyed his trust in state institutions to protect him, and reconfigured his relationship with the state (for which he had worked on active military service); it prompted him to attend EDL demonstrations; it constituted a new racialized identity through an insulting label (‘white bastard’). This confrontation with his race as ‘other’ was significant for ‘Daniel’ to his masculine identity. As Boesten notes, ‘Gender ... and sexuality ... help define and naturalize the hierarchies based on race and class.’⁷⁵ Expectations of privilege are central to white identity. For Frankenberg, ‘white people and people of color live racially structured lives ... White people are “raced”, just as men are “gendered”.’⁷⁶ James suggests that while ethnic minority identities are frequently constructed around shared practices and experiences, positive representations of a shared culture, as well as disadvantage, white identity is ‘grounded in a sense of entitlement and victimhood relative to people of color.’⁷⁷ Gear Rich suggests that many white people experience racial identity as part of their everyday lived experience.⁷⁸ Indeed, a key theme in the narratives of white participants in this research is that they are specifically marginalized as the ‘white working class’. They argue, in effect, that their race is visible to them as something to be overcome, but is invisible to privileged whites. These participants constitute what James names the ‘marginal whites’, who do not experience ‘full’ white privilege, owing to their class or immigrant heritage.⁷⁹ For ‘Daniel’, the confrontation described above produced a racialized and violent masculinity as—for him—an appropriate response to what he perceived as the injustice of Muslim violence in his area, and the institutional failure to address this. ‘Daniel’ now regards retaliatory violence as one necessary aspect of competition for ‘ownership’ of the town that he feels should uncontestedly be his. In order to defend it, he suffered an injury that he suggested was worse than anything he encountered in Iraq. His ‘own community’ is experienced as a war zone, a site of conflict and contested identity.

‘Daniel’ also used wider discourses on race, Islam and multiculturalism to frame his perception of a hierarchy of race, in which he believed he was a second-class citizen. The discourse of the death of multiculturalism mattered to participants. They echoed a sentiment expressed by then-Prime Minister David Cameron, in a 2011 Munich conference speech, namely that multiculturalism had been responsible for a loss of British values and the emergence of (Islamist) radicalization.⁸⁰ This shared nationalism meant research participants deeply resented

⁷⁵ Jelke Boesten, *Sexual violence during war and peace: gender, power, and post-conflict justice in Peru* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p. 4.

⁷⁶ Ruth Frankenberg, *White women, race matters: the social construction of whiteness*, new edn (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. 1.

⁷⁷ Osamudia R. James, ‘White like me: the negative impact of the diversity rationale on white identity formation’, *New York University Law Review* 89: 2, 2014, pp. 425–6.

⁷⁸ Camille Gear Rich, ‘Marginal whiteness’, *California Law Review*, no. 1498, 2010, pp. 1497–594.

⁷⁹ In fact, half of the participants are Irish, or describe themselves as of Irish heritage, a finding also noted by Busher in his 2015 study of the EDL, *The making of anti-Muslim protest*, para 362.

⁸⁰ David Cameron, ‘PM’s speech at Munich Security Conference’, 5 Feb. 2011, <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20131010092234/http://number10.gov.uk/news/pms-speech-at-munich-security-conference/>.

state suggestions that the EDL was ‘extremist’ in the same way as groups such as Al-Muhajiroun, who support the introduction of shari’a law into the UK. Hewitt has written of the ‘white backlash’ to British multiculturalism as a ‘socially disparate set of responses to equalities discourses’.⁸¹ EDL supporters I talked to endorsed the ‘British values’ originally articulated by Cameron (patriotism, the Union flag). Yet they perceived the state to have supported long-term change that had destroyed their communities, and supported a Muslim ‘other’ they regard as a gendered threat. Participants, for instance, frequently mobilized around issues such as the sexual exploitation of English women by Muslim men, terror attacks, female genital mutilation—but only in Muslim communities—or opposition to the niqab and burka. They resented what they regarded as censorship on these issues, citing the lack of censorship for others they admire for their outspoken and often racist views on Islam, including politicians and celebrities such as Donald Trump, Boris Johnson or Katie Hopkins. Participants perceived a double standard under which censorship was applied to them for reasons of class, not opinion.

EDL masculinities were therefore not isolated. In particular, aggressive hyper-masculinities were produced in space as part of a particular repertoire of behaviours, both continuous and contiguous with a broader community. ‘Darren’, a long-term activist with both EDL and the Infidels,⁸² now in his forties, told me:

When you’re growing up ... you walk over them, before they walk over you. You become a face—a face who is known on the street, or you become a target. You have to become someone that people think, don’t fuck with him, that’s Darren ... Then that reputation spreads and keeps you out of trouble for life.⁸³

When I asked other men about their life growing up before the EDL, they too described a constant potential for violence and the need to avoid victimization. Size was an indicator of strength, with perceived hyper-masculinity fixed in physicality and bodily presence.⁸⁴ Tommy Robinson, whose birth name is Stephen Yaxley-Lennon, is one of the EDL’s founders. He is a particularly divisive figure, banned from social media in 2019 for breaching hate-speech rules and, at the time of writing, in jail for contempt of court.⁸⁵ Robinson told me it was important to project size to avoid confrontation, never walking with the gaze cast down, or slouching, for instance. Any inability to avoid victimization entailed emasculation.

Hyper-masculinity was, however, only one of a range of masculinities for men in the EDL, and being an activist involved multiple masculine performances,

⁸¹ Roger Hewitt, *White backlash and the politics of multiculturalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 4.

⁸² A violent offshoot of the EDL often expressing racist ideology.

⁸³ Author’s interview with ‘Darren’, 4 Aug. 2016.

⁸⁴ Ramón Spaaij, ‘Men like us, boys like them’, *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 32: 4, 1 Nov. 2008, p. 380; J. W. Messerschmidt, ‘Becoming “real men”: adolescent masculinity challenges and sexual violence’, *Men and Masculinities* 2: 3, 2000, pp. 286–307.

⁸⁵ Rory Cellan-Jones, ‘Tommy Robinson banned from Twitter’, BBC News, 28 March 2018, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-43572168>; Alex Hern and Jim Waterson, ‘Tommy Robinson banned from Facebook and Instagram’, *Guardian*, 26 Feb. 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2019/feb/26/tommy-robinson-banned-from-facebook-and-instagram>.

some in contrast with the discourse of toxic masculinities as fostering domination, devaluing women and expressing homophobia outlined by Kupers.⁸⁶ Male participants also emphasized the ways in which they believed their activism represented a social good, helping the (non-Muslim) homeless, or raising money for veterans or for (non-Muslim) victims of sexual exploitation. While the perhaps disenfranchised section of the white working class attending demonstrations is part of a demographic recently termed the 'left behind',⁸⁷ the caring masculinities they expressed were again enabled through the reproduction of broader social norms. EDL demonstration culture and practice consciously reproduces behaviours common to the homosociality of the football stand, for instance chanting, singing and flag-waving, which enable group bonding.⁸⁸ Participants discussed the shared 'buzz' this created.⁸⁹ While Dunning suggests football culture tends to 'stress ability to fight, "hardness" and ability to "hold one's ale" as marks of being a "man"',⁹⁰ this is not just about toxic or hyper-masculinities. The football stand is an important affective resource as one of the few spaces in which men can actively show emotions including love, sadness, anger, grief and care, and the EDL consciously reproduced this.⁹¹

These insights from the field are indicative of a particularly masculinized white working-class tradition, which participants believe was under threat from liberal elites, 'Islam' and the state. Yet participants also drew on state norms about the pernicious effects of multiculturalism, tied to the risk of Islam(ist) violence and toxic Muslim masculinities, to frame their perceptions.

Women, masculinities and EDL patriarchy

While men active in the EDL express and claim both apparently feminine 'caring' masculinities and more aggressive forms of activism, women's activism disrupts both assumptions of the applicability of 'toxic masculinity' to the EDL, and, following Zalewski, can be understood to disrupt norms of patriarchy and manhood within the EDL. Women also adopted masculine roles and practices.⁹² As Pilkington notes, men's numerical dominance at events does not mean that the EDL does not appeal to women; nor does it necessarily equate to a lack of space in the movement for them.⁹³ If the EDL is a mainly male expression of grievance through toxic masculinity, how can one account for the presence of women at their demonstrations in any way? Connell herself suggests that 'focusing only on the activities of men occludes the practices of women in the construction of gender

⁸⁶ Kupers, 'Toxic masculinity as a barrier to mental health treatment in prison'.

⁸⁷ Treadwell and Garland, 'Masculinity, marginalization and violence'; David Goodhart, *The road to somewhere: the populist revolt and the future of politics* (London: Hurst, 2017), p. 19.

⁸⁸ Pilkington, *Loud and proud*.

⁸⁹ A term also familiar from Pilkington.

⁹⁰ Eric Dunning, 'Towards a sociological understanding of football hooliganism as a world phenomenon', *European Journal on Criminal Policy and Research* 8: 2, 2000, p. 151.

⁹¹ Chris Walton, Adrian Coyle and Evanthia Lyons, 'Death and football: an analysis of men's talk about emotions', *British Journal of Social Psychology* 43: 3, 2004, pp. 406, 412.

⁹² Halberstam, *Female masculinity*.

⁹³ Pilkington, "'EDL angels stand beside their men ... not behind them'", pp. 243, 253.

among men'.⁹⁴ Research on masculinities and violent groups in other contexts has also demonstrated their possibilities for forms of female status gain and emancipation, although patriarchy is often quickly reconstituted post-conflict.⁹⁵

In my research, women, like men, described how they evolved a confrontational, sometimes aggressive physicality during their formative years and in response to the masculinism of their social environment. Tommy Robinson's former personal assistant Hel Gower, for instance, told me she is a controversial figure in the movement, widely known as blunt and confrontational, an approach she suggested was shaped by the 'rough and ready' East End where she grew up. She, like 'Darren' (cited above), mythologized a working-class past, its values and physical terrain. 'Georgey', a seasoned EDL activist in her thirties, sought out confrontation with others both online and off, even once challenging the Al-Muhajiroun leader Anjem Choudary while he was preaching in the street. She saw this encounter as an emasculation of Choudary, based on her assumption that it is especially humiliating for Muslim men to be publicly confronted by women.

Handrahan suggests that women's peace movements draw on 'shared experiences that women have as women, mothers and wives subjected to violence' and perhaps therefore reduce the 'significance of ethnicity' through strengthened gender identity.⁹⁶ The women here do the opposite; their active appropriation of masculine norms, constructed through particular forms of race and class, draws further boundaries of faith, class and ethnicity between women. For instance, women's masculine performances were aimed at liberal elites. 'Georgey', who is in her thirties and works in child care, sees two tiers of feminists. She opposed the liberal feminism of women she suggested were 'stupid cows ... more worried about tits in a tabloid than girls getting their clits cut off' to those like herself who reject the title 'feminist' entirely, yet mobilize on protecting women from the perceived abuses of Islam. Both male and female EDL participants believed a liberal feminism had failed to defend women from Muslim men, and prioritized Islam (read as monolithic and sexually regressive) above the rights of the working class (read as sexually progressive). Participants homogenized what was understood by both 'Islam' and 'working class', ignoring aspects of each that challenged their activism.

If the term toxic masculinity does not enable us to see women's activism in the EDL, it also blinds us to EDL misogyny and how EDL patriarchy functions in ways consistent with wider society. Female participation in any masculine power structure represents a form of transgression.⁹⁷ In the EDL the male-female gender divide was accompanied by an additional binary which categorized women in classed language, despite their sharing class identities. Misogyny can emotion-

⁹⁴ Connell and Messerschmidt, 'Hegemonic masculinity', p. 848.

⁹⁵ Luisa Maria Dietrich Ortega, 'Looking beyond violent militarized masculinities', *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 14: 4, 2012, pp. 489-507; Miranda Alison, 'Women as agents of political violence: gendering security', *Security Dialogue* 35: 4, 2004, pp. 447-63.

⁹⁶ Lori Handrahan, 'Conflict, gender, ethnicity and post-conflict reconstruction', *Security Dialogue* 35: 4, 2004, p. 439.

⁹⁷ Véronique Pin-Fat and Maria Stern, 'The scripting of Private Jessica Lynch', *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political* 30: 1, 2005, pp. 25-53.

ally mediate social class,⁹⁸ particularly disgust for working-class women.⁹⁹ Skeggs notes that this demographic, ‘the excessive, unhealthy, publicly immoral white working-class woman ... epitomizes the zeitgeist of the moment’, an obsession with denigrating the working class.¹⁰⁰ Mainstream depictions of the working class are replete with classed abuse: ‘chav’ women are over-sexed and over-fertile;¹⁰¹ ‘underclass’ women’s sexual behaviour is juxtaposed with middle-class sexual norms.¹⁰² The EDL, as a patriarchal movement sharing norms with wider society, enables this classed misogyny to be reproduced within the very communities that are often the object of it.

Masculine performances for women within this homosocial and patriarchal space are therefore not risk-free, particularly when women express an independent sexuality and, essentially, contest EDL patriarchy.¹⁰³ Women can encounter censure for adopting the various masculinities enabling their participation at protest. In the early days of the EDL, male leaders wanted to exclude women. Robinson remembered: ‘When we were first going to Bradford ... for us, the men, we were thinking—this is the battleground, like. We’re going to come under huge attack. So, we tried saying women weren’t allowed to go [laughs]—fucking hell, they went nuts, man.’¹⁰⁴ Women did succeed in attending demonstrations, despite some EDL leadership opposition, and protested against the then Prime Minister David Cameron’s labelling of the EDL as ‘sick’.¹⁰⁵ Although men were not wanted, they marched behind the women, apparently in order to protect them. Hel Gower suggested this act was representative of a misogyny within the movement as a whole. The masculine norms of the group, while claiming to protect and serve women, in fact relegated female agency as a form of what Scrinzi labels ‘gender antagonism’.¹⁰⁶ This describes how the broad domination of masculine cultures necessitates the marginalization of women, who must struggle to find their place within systems that do not favour their participation, except in symbolic ways. The consequence is the division of a movement on gender lines.

Participants who had attended EDL demonstrations for some years distinguished between types of women, as well as between men and women. They referenced ‘coupling up’ as a feature of protest away-days, describing its effects within the group. Both male and female participants applied the movement’s highly masculinized group norms to the sexual activity of the women in the movement. Many understood female bodies at events in binary terms: those who were honourable

⁹⁸ William Ian Miller, *The anatomy of disgust* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), p. xiv.

⁹⁹ Stephanie Lawler, ‘Disgusted subjects: the making of middle-class identities’, *Sociological Review* 53: 3, 2005, p. 435.

¹⁰⁰ Skeggs, ‘The making of class and gender’, pp. 966–8.

¹⁰¹ Imogen Tyler, ‘“Chav mum chav scum”’, *Feminist Media Studies* 8: 1, 2008, pp. 29–30.

¹⁰² Helen Wilson and Annette Huntington, ‘Deviant (m)others: the construction of teenage motherhood in contemporary discourse’, *Journal of Social Policy* 35: 1, 2006, p. 69.

¹⁰³ Pilkington, ‘“EDL angels stand beside their men ... not behind them”’, p. 253.

¹⁰⁴ Author’s interview with Tommy Robinson, 26 Sept. 2016.

¹⁰⁵ Marshall Peter, ‘EDL women tell Cameron we’re not sick’, Demotix, 8 Oct. 2011, <https://web.archive.org/web/2011101144736/http://www.demotix.com/news/863998/edl-women-tell-cameron-were-not-sick>.

¹⁰⁶ Francesca Scrinzi, *Caring for the nation: men and women activists in radical right populist parties*, final research report (Brussels: European Research Council, 2014), p. 3.

and those who were not. The EDL Angels were a sub-group Gower was initially involved in organizing, in order to give women a voice to campaign on issues important to them, such as child sex exploitation and grooming. Gower shared the view of others in the EDL on the Angels, who used classed language: 'Rough as fucking shit, is what most people described them as.'¹⁰⁷ Similar gendered and classed judgements regarding sexuality were expressed by both men and women participants who had regularly attended EDL demonstrations:

To me the Angels seem to be there just to find a man ... I don't know why they think they have to do it, I really don't ... it's—going through them, it is literally going through them. ['Jane', 50s]¹⁰⁸

People was there just to sleep with anyone ... some of them [Angels] had a bad reputation ... some of the broads were just out for the dick. Some was old. You wouldn't actually believe it. There was one woman, she was 50 years old and she ... done a good 70%. Easy! She was disgusting. [Q: Do you think the guys were equally disgusting?] They was disgusting. Just for the demos. Just for sex in hotels, things like that. ['Iain', 19]¹⁰⁹

Female by birth, but you wouldn't say they were ladies, put it that way ... They call themselves EDL Angels ... They're like Anchor butter, they spread their legs like slappers. The men go through them. I wouldn't. I despise them all, they are filth-bags. ['Darren', 40s]¹¹⁰

Women are active participants in the EDL and, as noted above, frequently 'do' the same masculinities as the men. However, both male and female participants judged and censured particular EDL women, according to a classed misogyny apparent in mainstream discourse. This involved a certain hypocrisy. A conversation with 19-year-old 'Iain' was symptomatic. He told me: 'A woman should stay at home and cook and clean, that's the way I've been brought up. The man should work.' I suggested he criticized Islam because he believed it advocated precisely this approach to men and women, to which he replied: '[But] I would not *make* a woman stand in the kitchen and cook. You wouldn't *make* them. A Muslim would make them.'¹¹¹ Participants criticized a (monolithic) Islam for a traditionalist approach to gender; yet they also expressed a belief in the importance of 'traditional' gender roles as a legacy of 'English' culture. This was one of the inconsistencies in their gendered 'ideology'.

These complexities of masculinity, who can embody masculinities and the risks of this embodiment, are occluded by CVE repertoires and media discourses that can only associate masculinity in extremist movements with 'toxic' men. Returning to the Telford demonstration with which I began this article, the then EDL spokesman Crossland can be seen to invoke the right to self-expression in terms familiar to a marginalized male working-class demographic, and consistent with the culture

¹⁰⁷ Scrinzi, *Caring for the nation*, p. 3.

¹⁰⁸ Author's interview with 'Jane', 1 Sept. 2016.

¹⁰⁹ Author's interview with 'Iain', 10 Dec. 2016.

¹¹⁰ Author's interview with 'Darren', 4 Aug. 2016.

¹¹¹ Author's interview with 'Iain', 10 Dec. 2016.

and behaviour of his particular community. He demands the right to have the men's masculinity, their flag-waving and offensive chants, their activism against Islam(ism), understood as political expression, however stigmatized, and therefore not to be dismissed in terms which depoliticize particular men, such as 'toxic masculinity'.¹¹² This is not to imply that working-class culture is homogeneous. Clearly, many white working-class people strongly oppose the views of the EDL. Nor is it to judge such demonstration as reasonable; it is, rather, to contextualize it. What is clear is that EDL protest uses and activates masculinities already familiar to protesters from a wider context; activism mobilizes not just hyper-masculinity but other more caring masculinities that cannot easily be read as 'toxic'. Furthermore, there is continuity between EDL masculine identities and wider—patriarchal—norms dating from well before the emergence of the counter-jihad scene. The EDL is a microcosm of sections of wider British society.

Conclusion

Narratives of toxicity which readily fit into pre-existing hierarchies of both class and race occlude both the range of masculine performances in the EDL and their continuities with wider patriarchy. Indeed, not just masculinity in an extreme group such as the EDL, but also 'traditional' white working-class masculinity is often talked of as 'toxic' or 'in crisis' or 'subordinate'.¹¹³ To those who are not working class, working-class culture is often regarded as 'a hurdle that needs to be overcome'.¹¹⁴ From the inside, however, aggressive masculine behaviours, rituals and practices that appear threatening to—or indeed threaten—others feel *positive*. I began this piece with a question: what expression of masculinity did I witness at the anti-Islam(ist) demonstration by the EDL? If the answer is 'toxicity', where is the boundary between those aspects of masculine performance that are designated toxic, and those that constitute patriarchy, society-wide?

The piece has explored the relevance of Zalewski's man question as a route into this conundrum, and into an analysis of the ways in which masculinities, patriarchy, race and class entwine in producing power and casual violence; and to a discussion of masculinity that need not equate manhood itself with threat or toxicity. It has focused on a particular radical right movement, the EDL, to show how masculinities are revealed, and the material conditions in which they come into being, revealing the inadequacy of the toxic masculinity label to describe this activism. It has suggested that Zalewski offers a path not just for theoreticians of IR, but for researchers and policy-makers, for whom she provides the stepping stones required to circumvent the pitfalls of binary gendered thinking. In particular, her work cautions that while masculinity is attached to the bodies and

¹¹² Sara Ahmed, *The cultural politics of emotion*, 2nd rev. edn (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), pp. 176–7.

¹¹³ Linda McDowell, *Redundant masculinities? Employment change and white working class youth* (New York and Chichester: Wiley, 2011); Kimmel, 'Globalization and its mal(e)contents'.

¹¹⁴ Nicola Ingram, 'Working-class boys, educational success and the misrecognition of working-class culture', *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 30: 4, 2009, p. 423.

practices of men, it is not something that exclusively *belongs* to men.¹¹⁵ It is possible to see masculinities in the practices of women; and it is possible to recognize that many of the so-called toxic practices of the extreme fringes are present in society more widely. Just as extremists are in reality not separate from society,¹¹⁶ toxic masculinity is not separate from patriarchy or social gender norms.¹¹⁷ Nor is it an adequate term to describe what may not always be ideological, but is certainly political, action from ‘underclass’ men, given its delegitimizing effects. However, when particular men are regarded as the problem, the issue becomes not one of patriarchy, or society, but of agency in specific groups, and the responsibility for ‘fixing’ patriarchy is pushed onto them.

In the introduction to her 1998 book *The ‘man’ question in International Relations*, Zalewski explained why it was necessary to ask this question to ensure that men engaged with their own male power, and why men’s hegemony should be problematized.¹¹⁸ There was little optimism in Zalewski’s shift in the focus of feminist study from women to men. Twenty years on, the lack of optimism seems warranted. The contemporary focus is on particular masculinities. Instead of seeing women as ‘a problem to be solved’, the question is now not of ‘man’, but of particular categories of men.¹¹⁹ Governments have focused on extremism, first violent Islamism and now the radical right, and in so doing have produced as embodying ‘risk’ particular racialized and marginalized men, framed through the prism of ‘toxicity’. The onus is not on men to question their power, but on particular men to question their problematic use of violence. Extremism is constructed as discourse, divorced from wider society through a move to associate particular men with uniquely ‘toxic’ behaviours. Masculinity (singular) is not explored as a feature of gendered relations but essentialized in sex. The relational property of masculinity is mobilized, not to further understanding of extremist violence, but to differentiate good from bad men; to rely on particular men to mitigate the failures and violences of patriarchy as a whole. As Zalewski and others have emphasized, patriarchal power is resilient, and its intransigence is evident in counter-extremism policy and the discourses enabling its enactment.¹²⁰

In the UK and beyond, the interest of counter-extremism policy-makers in a gendered approach offers possibilities, but at the same time acts to reduce them. Contemporary interest in masculinity as a factor in extremism and right-wing populism is important; but at the moment, the effects of broader discourse and of policy do little more than reify both essentialized approaches to masculinity and existing power imbalances between men. For those of us working in contempo-

¹¹⁵ Zalewski, *Feminist International Relations*, p. 84.

¹¹⁶ Gavin Bailey and Phil Edwards, ‘Rethinking “radicalisation”: microradicalisations and reciprocal radicalisation as an intertwined process’, *Journal for Deradicalization*, no. 10, 2017, pp. 255–81.

¹¹⁷ Terry A. Kupers, ‘Psychotherapy with men in prison’, in Gary R. Brooks and Glenn E. Good, eds, *A new handbook of counseling and psychotherapy approaches for men* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001), cited in Kupers, ‘Toxic masculinity as a barrier to mental health treatment in prison’, p. 716.

¹¹⁸ Zalewski, ‘Introduction’, pp. 1–12.

¹¹⁹ Zalewski, ‘Introduction’.

¹²⁰ Paul Kirby and Marsha Henry, ‘Rethinking masculinity and practices of violence in conflict settings’, *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 14: 4, 2012, pp. 445–49; Stern and Zalewski, ‘Feminist fatigue(s)’.

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rary applications of feminist IR, Zalewski has been a canary in the mineshaft. She and Stern foresaw these issues, and warned of them. Zalewski's theorizing applied to the 'extreme' context destabilizes not just what manhood means, but any discourse of extremism constructed on the concept of toxic masculinity. Her work on the nature of gender, power and masculinity never loses sight of the relations between men and women. It shows the way and warns of the pitfalls of approaches that overemphasize questions of masculinities at the expense of seeing the power relations consequent on male hegemony and patriarchy. It is on these we should focus to understand violence, conflict and the production of extremism.