

## **The National in the Network Society: UKUncut, the English Defence League and the challenge for Social Democracy.**

Walkers crisps: potatoes, workers, factories & Gary Lineker.

All British, except the profits held in Switzerland to avoid tax [#ukuncut](#)

@UKUncut Twitter 30 Jan 2011

WHEN YOU MARCH TOMMORROW, MAKE SURE YOU REMEMBER WHY YOU ARE MARCHING, IT'S FOR THE SAME REASON OUR FOREFATHERS DIED. YES, TO KEEP ENGLAND FUCKING ENGLISH, NOT GERMAN AND DEFIANATLY NOT MUSLIM. BE PROUD AND BE ENGLISH.

Comment by "Ray" on Facebook.com English Defence League (EDL) page 4 Feb 2011

### **Introduction**

In amongst the student occupations of the winter of 2010, someone under the user name "UK People's Initiative" used the social networking website Facebook to attempt to organize the dubiously named "Demonstration of Resistance" for the 20th of December. The online event called on activists from the growing protest movement to attend a march through central London against public sector cuts. Sharp eyed protestors picked up on a discussion of the event by supporters of the EDL on micro-blogging site Twitter. The right-wingers' purported plan was to ambush and assault the demonstrators tricked into attending the demo. Once this was discovered the news quickly spread around Twitter, Facebook and on various other blogs and news feeds. Only about 20 people showed up and promptly went home: there was no violence. But why was a group that claims to be trying to defend English culture from "radical Islam" suddenly targeting its aggression at students and tax avoidance protesters?

We believe that for the EDL, the current wave of left-orientated demonstrations across the UK are an encroachment on their political terrain. The anti-tax avoidance message of UKUncut – "the rich avoid paying their taxes, while the rest of us bear the brunt of public sector cuts" – plays into a similar

logic of common sense fairness that the EDL seeks to exploit. Both are also operating at similar scales, organising locally but coordinating nationally. Where the right seeks to build their nationalisms through a frame of ethnic or cultural exclusivity, the media friendly actions of UKUncut have enabled the left to start to articulate a different view of the nation on the basis of tax justice and public service provision. This may be classic centre left stuff, but it differs from the usual arguments around welfare provision by employing rhetoric which re-establishes the link between state and nation.

The absence of a relationship between a British state and British nation is apparent in contrast to the strength of this link in Wales and Scotland since devolution, which have demonstrated that it is possible to construct a modern nationalism of the left. The divergence in Westminster politics as compared to the Holyrood and Senedd has exposed the hollowness of New Labour's attempts to work with a British identity. Although the Welsh and Scottish nationalist parties derive some of their appeal through direct opposition to Westminster, they have also solidified their support through a robust defence of tax and spend. In Scotland, for instance, the case for free higher education has been made and won as a national value and a social good, likewise free prescriptions in Wales.

On the other hand, the British Labour party has mostly recoiled awkwardly from using the language of nation, or, when it has drawn upon the ideas of patriotic virtues, it is through triangulation with the anti-immigration discourses of the right. The sort of populism that emerged in Gordon Brown's "British Jobs, for British Workers" or David Blunkett's idea of Britishness tests for immigrants could never ring true in the shadow of Blair's innumerate speeches about the necessity of globalisation, and the defence of hugely unpopular foreign policies on the basis of membership of a global community with America at the helm (Blair 2001). Blair's early flirtation with "Cool Britannia" was the last successful attempt to invoke the national spirit without structuring an exclusivist identity, but its rock star aesthetic was never durable as a politics. Unlike the progressive nationalisms of the devolved countries in the union, Cool Britannia offered no future beyond the marketability of a current fad. It was short-termist,

playing into the cult of youth without planning for a working adult life. Labour's attempts to use the language of nation also failed because they misread the driving forces shaping social relations in the network society, and the changing configurations of capitalism, culture and technological development.

Both UKUncut and the EDL are savvy to what these changes mean: they are opposing forces on the frontline of new political configurations made possible by the increasing accessibility of sophisticated and scalable tools of digital communication. Yet the battle lines go beyond the politics of the street and deep into the foundations of our established ideologies. To confront how the politics of the left must adapt its thinking to this new era, it will need to rearticulate the relationship between the local, national and global, through the lens of the material connections between people and things that social network technologies make apparent.

For social democracy, the techno-cultural shift brought about by the democratization of digital network technologies means there is a need to reconcile two challenges that are currently understood as separate, even oppositional. The first is how social democracy might reincorporate the national into the politics of a redistributive state to build consent for a programme of equality; the second is the inadequacy of centralised state control in the "network society".

To explain the connection between these two tasks, the term "network society" needs some breaking down. The "networks" referred to are multiple. Coined by Manuel Castells in the mid 1990s, it initially referred to the networks of *global capital flows*. Over time, with the mass take-up of mobile phones and the emergence of blogging and other social media, the concept has had to be expanded to include cultural and social life. In this way, the possibilities of "mass self-communication" (2009: 65-72) facilitated by *digital* networks have started to make explicit the *material* networks of peoples' lived experience. We must now understand the "network society" as a way of describing the state of modern capitalism, the relationship between technologies of personal communication and culture, and the way in which we form and maintain relationships both individually and collectively. All three of these

phenomena, separately and in conjunction, are radically changing our relationships to the “imagined communities” of place, ethnicity and nation (Castells 2009; Anderson 1991). Within this new conceptual space, politics is changing fast; coalitions of interest are shifting rapidly; novel ideologies are being formed and old ones being revived.

### **The network and the crisis of the nation**

To many, the idea that websites and Internet services such as Facebook and Twitter should cause a crisis for social democracy will seem faddish, but the reality is deeper, profoundly so. In 2006, Yochai Benkler was already defending such a position from accusations that it was dated:

It seems passé today to speak of “the Internet revolution.” In some academic circles, it is positively naïve. But it should not be. The change brought about by the networked information environment is deep. It is structural. It goes to the very foundations of how liberal markets and liberal democracies have co-evolved for almost two centuries. (p. 1)

This is a crisis point for modern politics, because since the French Revolution, and the *Declaration of the Rights of Man*, “nationalism and democracy [have been fused] in an apparently irresistible combination” (Gamble 1981, 133). In the “network society”, where national borders are permeable to capital, commodity and communication flows, and identities are constructed by leisure interests or consumption of global brands rather than localities or shared national cultures, the credibility of the nationally-bound democracy is increasingly under threat.

Europe, as an example of multinational co-governance, could represent a new form of territorial identity, but this merely replicates the tension between the bordered state and the borderless network at a grander scale; and besides, especially in the UK, a European identity has little visceral power. The EU itself draws its authority from its member states and its federal functions are necessarily limited, wielding legislative powers, for instance, but without an independent disciplinary infrastructure: a court but no army, police or prisons. Across Europe, social democracy remains fundamentally predicated on

the state, and states still draw their authority from the discourse of the nation. It is precisely because networks have little respect for national borders that how it adapts to the conjunction of the nation and the network will determine whether social democracy remains a political force in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The well placed fears of revisiting nationalism which date to the 1930s and 1940s forget that it was initially *the* radical enlightenment movement in Europe, and was an assertion of the fundamental rights of the people against the arbitrary powers of church, monarch and aristocracy. “What is a nation?” asked Abbe Sieyes, in his inflammatory 1789 pamphlet. “A body of people who join together to live under common laws and be represented by the same legislative assembly.” If the nobility and church insisted on living under different laws then they should be excluded from the nation; the third estate, those living under common law, was “everything” (Sieyes 1789). While this is not, of course, advocating a modern day Terror, it recognizes the French Revolution as foundational to the development of liberal democracy across the world. A return to Sieyes’ civic understanding of the nation means that it should not only be possible, but desirable, for the idea to be reclaimed as a space for solidarity, fundamental rights and equality, in opposition to multi-national corporations, international celebrity culture and the “weightless millionaires” that seem to exist beyond the realm of the nations that the rest of us inhabit, and who refuse to be subject to their laws.

British social democracy has presented itself as powerless against these power-brokers of globalisation, as it is bound to the state and its borders. Yet there was a paradox implicit in New Labour’s view of globalization and the knowledge economy: on the one hand, these ideas claim that capital is no longer subject to states, it is free to roam where it pleases, while on the other hand it *requires* nations to compete with one another to function. Social democracy, unlike capitalism, is bound to the idea of the nation: states remain nation-states and their power can be reasserted in those terms.

The concept of the nation can be the locus of struggle against capitalist excess.<sup>1</sup> For some this is a terrifying prospect, but in the absence of a new discourse of international federalism, or an as yet unimagined construction of collective solidarity, the nation-state remains essential to our Western democracies. We need to embrace a new vision of nationalism, “a civic identity which exists alongside other identities” (Johnson 2010, 80), in which the nation is not an ethnically determined relationship with a territory, but a conceptual space of a social contract that binds people, collective life and the processes of governance together against the atomizing forces of capital. The discovery of a progressive civic nationalism may not be the desired direction for many on the left, but it is an important strategic move that may well be transcended in the future, once the immediate challenges have been faced.

The risk of digital networks facilitating the politics of the right is more real and more frightening than a left engagement with nation. Networked right-activism has powerfully manifested itself in the Tea Party movement in the USA and the English Defence League (EDL) in the UK. These virulent mobilisations of prejudice and reaction are dominating the discourse of the nation and shaping its politics. And they are bound, not just to the inequalities of racial exclusion, but also to an ideal of the state-less nation, and the retrenchment of the redistributive mechanisms of modern governance. These movements on the right have spread rapidly through digital networks and opposition to them has been slow. This is partly because, after the successful use of such technologies in Barack Obama’s election campaign, the left smugly thought the terrain of the digital network was theirs, even as Blue State Digital (the organisation behind the Democratic electoral machine) has sold itself to a global advertising giant. But it is also partly because this new right is occupying a real gap in the political imagination - and their grievances are material, even if their targets are born of hatred, misinformation and fear.

---

<sup>1</sup> That the weak nation plays into the hands of large corporations is currently being illustrated in the depiction of the UK as 'Broken Britain', forced to privatise public services because of 'the markets', slash spending for fear of a neo-liberal academic deciding we should lose our triple A credit rating, and unable to collect corporate tax even when deemed entitled to by the European court! (Hawkes 2011)

In the UK, the democratic left has historically relied on the power of trade unions (themselves often a network) to organise opposition to the right and far right, constrain the powers of capital and challenge the dehumanising decision-making processes of the state. In an era when identity has shifted away from traditional class positions and the membership of unions has collapsed, the role of protectors of the people against these forces must fall to other forms of network too - the unions cannot shoulder the burden alone. We believe these are already being built in the new green movement and the pro-tax/anti-cuts protests.

While these movements are not intrinsically social democratic, alliances can and should be made with them in the face of seemingly intractable problems across the spectrum of left concerns. Realistically, social democracy, if it reinvents itself and its relation to place, the nation and the network is perhaps the only political model that can win consent for the necessary transformations for a greener and fairer economy while maintaining a commitment to fundamental rights. In short, we need a politics that is prepared to embrace and use state power, albeit in a less centralized and technocratic way than it has to date.

The threat of an “energy crunch”, which enforces relocalisation through a sudden shrinking of the oil supply, is a case in point: both Transition Towns and the BNP have seen the coming crisis as a potentially positive moment for social regeneration, albeit from vastly different viewpoints (Hopkins, 2006; BNP 2005). The state must facilitate the localism of Transition while combating the parochialism of the far right, especially when these differing interpretations of what constitutes the “local” play out against growing inequality. We need a confident state power that stands up to the anti-government discourse of the right and keeps spending, but we also need a state that trusts its people enough to relinquish control and allow the creativity, energy and power of those pursuing social democratic ends outside formal political processes to re-imagine our nation.

## Transformations of the 'network society'

To do this we must try to better understand how the techno-cultural shifts in the move towards a horizontal network society challenge political centralism and reorganise our economic lives. While embedded in history, the forms of social relating we wish to examine are necessarily novel; the speed of technological change, the rapidity of its spread across the globe and the sheer number of people making connections with one another across space have created challenges and possibilities unimaginable just two decades ago. To chart this transformation, we will remain within the frame of the sociologist Manuel Castells and his work over the last 15 years, borrowing some of his terminology and developing it, to briefly describe what we see as the emerging political struggles of contemporary Britain.

*The Information Age*, Castells' weighty trilogy produced in the second half of the 1990s, begins with the *Rise of the Network Society* (1996), in which networks are seen primarily as those of financial capital which operate in opposition to human values and needs:

People increasingly organise their meaning not around what they do but on the basis of what they are, or believe they are. Meanwhile, on the other hand, global networks of instrumental exchanges selectively switch on and off individuals, groups, regions, and even countries, according to their relevance in fulfilling the goals processed in the network, in a relentless flow of strategic decisions. It follows a fundamental split between abstract, universal instrumentalism, and historically rooted, particularistic identities. Our societies are increasingly structured around a bipolar opposition between the Net and the Self. (3)

This new order provides opportunities for those who are seen to be of value to the network (highly educated, flexible, "self-programmable") who gain value from each connection, but also excludes those seen to be valueless, making it harder for them to accrue value. In response to this growing inequality, those excluded ("the computer illiterate... consumption less groups, and... under communicated territories" (25)) begin to form "resistance identities" around this disconnection, leading to the growing importance of local, ethnic or religious identities.

In this schema, financial capital inhabits a timeless space of flows while people inhabit the space of places. The majority of workers engage in generic labour in which they are interchangeable with any



other labourers around the globe, but are culturally individualised to relate through competition, so that collective action on the basis of class becomes less and less possible (476). Unable to work cooperatively across continents against the network of capital that controls them, identities of place grow ever more important.

In *The Power of Identity* (1997) Castells takes these ideas further, examining the crisis of political legitimacy caused by globalisation that has “created a vacuum... filled with identity-based movements” (xxiii). These “resistance identities” use idioms of territory, or transport the communal ties of the village to the growing urban centres of the globalised world. These identities may still coincide with states, but these have “lost much of [their] sovereignty” (419), and besides, the state is generally rightly understood as colluding with the oppressive forces of capital. It is often smaller geographical territories - Wales, Catalonia - that command the strongest sense of identification and basis for mobilisation.<sup>2</sup>

Writing in 1997, when information and communication technologies (ICT) had already revolutionised the financial services but social interaction on the Internet was limited to “the cute but scarcely relevant practice of chat rooms” (Castells 2004, 14), it was too early to see the potential for new forms of digital networks to form “a planetary chain of resistance” (Waterman 2001, in Matterlart 2003, 157), both embedded in localities and global in reach and outlook. For Castells, at this point, they are inherently too isolated. “However these identities resist, they barely communicate... with each other because they are built around sharply distinct principles, defining an 'in' and 'out'” (421). In contrast to resistance identities, “project identities”, built around issues such as feminism and environmentalism, aim to transform society as a whole, asserting a species wide commonality of experience. But without the mechanism of the interactive digital network, Castells cannot conceive of how these “networks of social change” (428) will be able to mobilise the power of local identity to global ends.

---

<sup>2</sup> Wales and Catalonia are, of course, (mostly) understood by their inhabitants as nations, and have claimed a degree of administrative sovereignty, but ultimately the “legitimate use of force” (Weber 1918) lies with the British and Spanish states. Westminster and the Cortes Generales thus become the source of legitimation for the dehumanising forces of neo-liberalism for Welsh and Catalan nationalists.

His perspective has changed somewhat five years later, in *The Information Society and the Welfare State* (2002), which looks at ICT development in Finland and contrasting it to Silicon Valley and Singapore. The combination of rapid dissemination of ICT equipment and skills has led, by this point, to Finland being one of the world leaders in the telecoms industry, but it has achieved this in conjunction with generous welfare provision, creating a “socially sustainable network society” (14) rather than one in which capital networks are at odds with human selves. There are three key points relevant to our analysis that mark this turning point in Castells’ thinking.

Firstly, the state has allowed *itself* to be transformed by the possibilities of networks, developing an “informational welfare state” to deliver services, for example in the “seamless health care system, in which the customer does not have to be concerned with the boundaries between different organisations; all needs are served through one service point” (93). Secondly, civil society had been supported in the development of “social hackerism” – the beginnings of the “generative framework” of Zittrain (2008), where resources and space are given by the state for actions external to the state. Castells is clearly excited by the possibilities he foresees in, for example, parents using ICT to self-organise sharing childcare responsibilities, or trade unions having collective e-mail addresses so they can organise “demonstration by click” (98). These two factors show that, by relinquishing certain forms of control, the state is able to harness the power of networks rather than find itself at odds with them.<sup>3</sup> Finally, the integration of these tools has been understood as *part* of a strong Finnish national identity rather than opposed to it, which Castells sees as partly happy historical accident, arguing that the harsh climate created a pragmatic attitude to any new technology which might help survive the winters. By combining the digital with the national, and using the capabilities of ICT to deliver services and help people to work cooperatively, Finland has avoided many of the oppositions Castells warned of in *The Rise of the Network Society*.

---

<sup>3</sup> It is important to note that social hackerism is conceived of as *additional* to the core provision of the welfare state, not, as in the case of David Cameron’s “Big Society”, a replacement for it.

His excitement at the power of digital tools to create meaningful alternatives to the logic of capital flows becomes even more palpable in his most recent book, *Communication Power* (2009). By now, Web 2.0 has emerged, becoming a central part of the lives of the majority of the world's rich and ever-growing numbers of the world's poor. "We do not watch internet, as we watch TV. In practice, Internet users... *live with the Internet*" (64). While the traditional mass-media has been going through a period of massive concentration of ownership, online we have entered the era of "mass-self communication", through SMS, blogs, vlogs, pod-casts, wiki, peer to peer sharing, etc. And although much of this might be rightly seen as a kind of "electronic autism" (66), communicating with no-one, there is nonetheless a "potential synergy between the rise of mass self communication and the autonomous capacity of civil societies around the world to shape the process of social change" (303). Indeed, real world effects of digital communications on political systems had already at this point been seen in as far apart as the Philippines, Korea, Ukraine, Ecuador, Thailand, Nepal, Burma, Chile, Spain and the United States (348-9).

Leading on from his construction of "project identities", he notes that "the Internet has played an increasingly important role in the global movement to prevent global warming" (325). However, by focusing on the various online tools used by Friends of the Earth or the Stop Climate Change Coalition to raise their profile or mobilising action on or offline (323-325), Castells misses what is truly novel about the new green movement that has emerged in the last ten years: its growing plurality and diversity, the alliances being formed between previously disconnected issues (for example, links with trade unions) and its ability to link up "resistance identities" embedded in localities. These linkages are what we term "identity networks", creating political impact through mass horizontal action, "local at all points", like Latour's railroad train, even if "it takes you from Brest to Vladivostock" (Latour 1993, 117). Rather than Al Gore as the celebrity spokesman for the environmental project identity - a "weightless millionaire" if ever there was one - the emerging figureheads in the battle against climate change are very different.

## Identity networks

It is our contention that the new green movement has developed, in the last ten years, from being polarised between the “resistance identities” of individual battles over specific locations and the “project identities” concerned with global emissions, to a more subtle and nuanced “identity network”. Friends of the Earth and Stop Climate Chaos were pivotal in passing the Climate Change Bill in 2008, but this was essentially an old-school lobbying job, operating through fairly traditional channels with some cosmetic online tinkering. An example of where the “identity network” can be seen at work is in the loose coalition formed to stop the third runway at Heathrow, mapped by John Stewart in *Victory Against All Odds: How the Heathrow campaign was won* (2010). The campaign drew together a potent combination of groups, organisations and figures, from the West Londoners connected through the noise pollution of the planes over their heads (HACAN), the villagers of Sipson, Harlington and Harmondsworth fighting the destruction of their homes (NoTRAG), the celebrities who bought and publicised the Greenpeace “Airplot” (Emma Thompson, Zac Goldsmith, Alistair McGowan), the politicians from all parties who kept the issue live in Parliament (John McDonnell, John Gummer) and the activists in Climate Camp and Plane Stupid who linked the debate to the global fight against climate change. While remaining separate, tactics and resources were shared, personal connections were formed, and the actants involved were transformed.

Climate Camp made itself ‘local’ for a week by holding the 2007 camp in a field next to the airport; celebrities made themselves neighbours by buying the Airplot; John McDonnell MP took direct action, picking up the mace in the House of Commons; HACAN held 40 public meetings attended by 20,000 during the official consultation period, the end of which was publicised by Plane Stupid’s headline grabbing banner drop off the Houses of Parliament. Throughout the campaign, global and local, online and offline, “project identities” and “resistance identities” were blended to make a compelling

case that this was an authentic expression of “the people” against a corporate giant and a remote and unrepresentative state. It was understood *simultaneously as* an issue affecting the villagers of Sipson, the residents of West London, the millions of other locals affected by airport expansion (connected through the AirportWatch network), and the billions around the world who will suffer from climate change in their own localities. Thousands signed up online to become ‘beneficial owners’ of the Greenpeace Airplot, a piece of land in the proposed path of the new runway, which was chalked in giant letters, so as to be visible from the planes above it, with the emotive phrase: “Our Climate, Our Land” (Greenpeace 2009). And these transformations have had effects beyond the immediate aims of the campaign. Activists who “adopted” residents have remained friends with them. John McDonnell has become a frequent spokesperson on climate change in Parliament. The Airplot has become a community garden. Members of Plane Stupid used their funders to buy a house next to the airport, and have now set up Transition Town Sipson.

Identity networks can mobilise on a substantial scale and have real political effects, creating solidarity across space while maintaining the complexity of the particular. But the network that formed to stop the third runway emerged in a vacuum of the nation as a sphere of political action. It constructed a narrative that tied the disparate project and resistance identities together in a way that not only asserted the interest of the various participants of the campaign on global and local scales against the intermediary of the national; it was also a campaign that was intrinsically anti-state, peaking with the banner drop declaring the Palace of Westminster to be the headquarters of BAA.

This is not a criticism of the campaign. What emerged was a semi-organic strategy to combat an abuse of state power that put local and global concerns at odds with a limited vision of the national interest. This limited vision is one in which politicians see the state as a weak force against the tides of globalisation and the fluidity of capital. Its role becomes nothing more than ensuring that the nation is not “switched off” in the logic of Castells’ network society – indeed, it could be argued that New

Labour's policy framework was predicated on the idea that they were powerless to do anything except mitigate the worst excess of global capital through modest redistribution. The Heathrow campaign refused to accept that notion and won. They won partially because they were dogged, determined and right, but they also won because, while New Labour were operating under the logics of the network society of the 1990s where global capital was king, the campaign was at the vanguard of the new, democratised social-network society in which capital is just one way of forming links between people and groups. Contrary to the arguments of BAA, the victory of the Heathrow campaign did not mean some sudden loss of British competitiveness in the global economy. Instead it provided a model for other protest groups across Europe (and indeed the world) to follow. For the "weightless millionaires" of network capitalism this is a wakeup call. Capital may be highly fluid and mobile, but it multiplies in places that are very much physical and real. It needs access to markets and infrastructure: things that are provided by nations and states. There is a real political strength in this realisation that state and nation have the power to control who, how and why the interaction between people and capital occurs.

Thus we are at a moment for social democracy to reassert itself and the redistributive state as inextricably linked to the idea of the nation of people under common law and with common values. The emerging battle against cuts to libraries in the UK is adopting the sort of identity network model to embrace as we write: while each fight is against an individual council, they are connected through online tools like [falseeconomy.org.uk](http://falseeconomy.org.uk), and sharing messages and tactics, such as "mass borrowing" all the books in the library in protest (BBC 2011a; BBC 2011b). The geographical attachment to the particular becomes simultaneously a national attachment to the idea of literacy, education and learning as a public good. These sorts of campaigns enable the democratic left to build a consensus around core values: the local group ties to a national message which asserts a universal right. Literacy is a common good, which we do not compete over, its benefit grows for all as more of us become literate.

## The “wrong sort” of identity network

While anti-cuts campaigners are rediscovering the link between national values and state provision, the rise of the EDL is a consequence of the disconnect between statist governance and the discourse of nation. They play on the localism agenda, telling those left behind by globalisation that their geographical ties make them important and deserving of privilege. As a global phenomenon, the resistance identities that drive this new localist fascism are increasingly finding common ground with similar movements, despite their different nationalisms; “identity networks” are not just the property of the left, the greens, the privileged or those we would naturally think of as “international”. The British far-right now participate in online and off-line networks across Europe and the Atlantic, made up of like-minded people who share their concerns, fears and prejudices. Participation in far-right networks can transform their understanding of their own disadvantage and engender a vital sense of agency in the world in which they are powerless. Rather than being a relic of an old East End or the post-industrial north, the EDL are active participants in 21st century global neo-fascism, a movement reported by the media and influencing governments across Europe and North America.

How can the left respond to this threat? Certainly not merely through the mechanisms of increased central control. Fighting the EDL on the streets, locking up their members or banning them for inciting racial hatred plays into the narrative of victimisation which attracted groups of alienated young men in the first place. Just as the increased surveillance and infringement of civil liberties following September 11 have further distanced young British Muslims from the state - indeed, have transformed their sense of identity so that, for many, religion has become its most central aspect (Saeed 2008) - trying to stamp out the EDL by force fundamentally misunderstands its aims. Unlike the National Front in the 1970s, which sought to demonstrate power through overt clashes with anti-fascists and police, the EDL is not attempting to take on the state on its own terms (Burghart and Zeskind 2010). It exercises a different sort of power, stoking up existing tensions within limited geographical areas, and giving its

actions collective force through sharing information, strategies, resources and press contacts through horizontal, digitally mediated networks. The EDL pose a new sort of threat and will require new sorts of solutions that it would be foolish to pretend to have already worked out; but building links between isolated 'locals' along the lines of Hope Not Hate's successful campaigns against the BNP, combined with social democracy reclaiming the national, might offer a way forward.

As new digital technologies become more widely available they offer both sides of the political divide the opportunity to build or maintain identity networks, either with similarly alienated groups, those in solidarity with common political projects, or with people experiencing comparable forms of oppression around the world. When linked to fundamental principles of equality, respect or the environment, these identity networks can be transformative and emancipatory, but there is also the possibility of reactionary localisms and fragmentary cultural fundamentalisms. The processes and technologies that have created the alterglobalisation and new green movements, linked the EDL up with the Tea Party, and fuelled Islamic fundamentalism, have similar roots – but will result in very different political outcomes.

## **Conclusion**

Political power is increasingly being wielded by those that embrace the network logic. Movements are organising and acting without the formalised structures expected by political parties, and yet they are shaping the trajectory of politics and forcing policy makers to meet them and their agendas. From the Tea Party in the USA to the student occupations of 2010 in the UK, these movements are remoulding the political space in which decisions are made. They are intrinsically oppositional to elite structures and are resilient enough that they cannot be easily suppressed, operating to a “starfish” model that cannot be decapitated (Brafman and Beckstrom 2006).



These movements use social networks to affiliate, but also to organise and disseminate information horizontally at a pace that cannot be suppressed by state intelligence apparatus without unacceptable levels of oppression – unacceptable to liberal democracies but equally to the seamless functioning of modern capitalism. You cannot crush one, without shutting down the other. The potential of this speedy dissent was used to great effect to organise the “Facebook strikes” in Egypt in 2008 and the anti-government protests in Tehran orchestrated through Twitter in 2009 (Hands 2011, 1). Indeed, it is a similar principle, which Armand Mattelart terms “netwar”, that enables terrorist organisations and guerrilla networks to continue to operate and key members to evade capture despite decades of pursuit by the world’s most formidable military power (2003, 131). By using the same tools to organize that make capital so fluid, these oppositional movements are physically embedded in the structures they seek to overturn.

Networks can respond at great speed, sharing ideas and creating resistance far faster than the NGOs, trade unions and pressure groups that make up traditional left activism. We have seen UKUncut scaling up from a one off event to dozens of regular protests across the country in a matter of weeks. By creating a loose network with an open collaborative website at its heart ([ukuncut.org.uk](http://ukuncut.org.uk)), it has succeeded in orchestrating action in a national frame while maintaining local autonomy, marrying social democratic principles with a participatory, informal organisational structure that is functionally leaderless. More significantly, its traditional left-wing calls for fair tax-and-spend, alongside an assault on wealthy tax dodgers and multinational corporations, has won approval from such bastions of tradition as the *Daily Mail* in its appeal to a “fair play” model of Britishness (Daily Mail 2010).

This recourse to national identity refocuses attention on the real villains of the “network society”, by targeting the double standards previously assumed to be the right of the mobile elite in a global capitalist society. This is the call of Sieyes revisited, the assertion of the rights of the Third Estate against those that consider themselves beyond the common law of the nation. Through the vistas of the

network society, asking people to pay their taxes is a revolutionary call and it may well spread. As we write, the organisation is starting to build European connections, expanding its targets to include the tax havens that make such a system possible. Defending the nation in this manner becomes a global good that values the equally strong assertions of fellow nations. This is the spirit of a new nationalism that builds its ideology upon fair taxation, cross-cultural solidarity, and the rights and privileges of an open and interactive model of empowered citizenship.

Digital networks are tools which expose the material networks of our collective lives, providing new platforms for insurgent politics that can challenge the inhuman networks of capital. They empower the individual, by placing them at the heart of a web of connections of their own construction, yet they also enable a collective response to emerge with rapidity. Increasingly, those using these tools are exercising political power (Little 2010). There has been a tendency to techno-fetishism that sees digital media as inherently emancipatory, and the chief threats to their ability to deliver equality coming from the state and the corporations who dominate the web (Hands 2011). This argument fails to see that a politics based around networks could be profoundly different depending upon its ideological frame. Networks are ambivalent to the priorities of previous political constructions: they can deliver the equality project of the left, or the hatred and bigotry of the far right. This makes the necessary relinquishing of central control a risky business, and one that the left has often used as justification for increased state intervention. New Labour, for example, presided over an unprecedented era of state intrusion and surveillance over its citizens, largely in response to the threat of purported terrorist and paedophile networks (Porter 2009). Even if this was an adequate or reasonable response in the past, it is no longer tenable as a way to move forward with an emerging generation of vocal and politically minded “network natives”.

The political formations that have led to this point have left us with a dislocated and fractured sense of who we are, but the same formations are the material out of which we will build the

operational and ideological collectivities of the future. The gaps in our social consciousness around the national, and its status as an area of contestation, are a huge flashpoint in the interim between the current moment in political thinking and the ideas and alliances that will emerge in the decades ahead. For now, social democracy must be the ideological force that leads the battle for that space in its own terms and under its own values and logics. Not as a bulwark against the relentless movement of capital, but as a positive ideology that champions an inclusive state that empowers people directly. In the meantime, this will give space for the new political formations of the left to emerge and develop. There are many reasons to be hopeful, and there are a wealth of ideas emerging around collaborative consumption (Botsman and Rogers 2010), co-production (NEF 2008), corporate co-operativism (Grant 2010) and so on. Out of the current moment could emerge any number of progressive political programmes, from an internationalist network syndicalism that flourishes in the spaces capitalism leaves behind, to a digital corporate welfarism emerging out of the Finnish experience recounted by Castells.

Our politics must reshape itself in an era when social networks become the key locus of struggle, not just for the spirit of the nation, but also for policy making, service delivery and the market. Moreover, social democracy can and should adapt to this new terrain for its own sake, because the cultural shifts happening around digital network technologies could potentially be the heralds of a new order that is both *more* social and *more* democratic. The concomitant risk is that if we do not, networks will come to be dominated by corporate interests and the far right, who seek to use them for anti-social and undemocratic ends.

## Bibliography

- Ainley, P and Allen, M (2010) *Lost Generation* London: Continuum
- Anderson, B. (1991) *Imagined Communities* London: Verso
- Barnett, A (2010) 'Forces Stacked Against Modern Liberty' from Rosemary Bechler ed. (2009) *The Convention on Modern Liberty: The British Debate on Fundamental Rights and Freedoms* Exeter: Imprint available at <http://www.opendemocracy.net/ourkingdom/anthony-barnett/forces-stacked-against-modern-liberty> accessed 13/02/2011
- BBC (2011a) Buckinghamshire Library Emptied in Cuts Protest, 17 Jan <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-beds-bucks-herts-12204369> accessed 13/02/2011
- BBC (2011b) Isle of Wight library protestors plan 'mass borrow', 21 Jan, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-hampshire-12248991> accessed 13/02/2011
- Benkler, Y. (2006) *The Wealth of Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom* New Haven, London: Yale University Press
- Blair, T. (2001) *Speech to Conference* <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2001/oct/02/labourconference.labour6> accessed 13/02/2011
- BNP (2005) *The Peak Oil Report* online: no longer available
- Botsman, R. and Rogers, R. (2010) *What's Mine is Yours: How Collaborative Consumption is Changing the Way We Live* London: Harper Collins
- Brafman, O. & Beckstrom, R. A. (2006) *The Starfish and the Spider: The unstoppable power of leaderless organizations*. New York: Portfolio.
- Castells, M. (1996) *The Rise of The Network Society* Oxford: Blackwell
- Castells, M. (2010) *The Power of Identity* 2nd Edition Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell
- Castells, M. (2009) *Communication Power* Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Daily Mail (2010) 'Mayhem in Oxford St as protesters target stores including Topshop's flagship branch over firms avoiding tax bills' 5<sup>th</sup> December 2010 <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1335632/Sir-Philip-Greens-flagship-Topshop-closes-protests-taxes-cause-mayhem.html> accessed 13/02/2011
- Edahiro J. (2010) 'Letter from Japan' *Resurgence Magazine* 262 Oct. 2010 <http://www.resurgence.org/magazine/article3174-letter-from-japan.html> accessed 13/02/2011

- Gamble, A. (1981) *An Introduction to Modern Social and Political Thought* London: Macmillan
- Glennie (2011) 'How the Facebook generation keeps people poor' in *The Guardian* 5th January 2011 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/global-development/poverty-matters/2011/jan/05/facebook-generation-poor-inequality?INTCMP=SRCH> accessed 13/02/2011
- Grant, J. (2010) *Co-opportunity* Chichester: Wiley
- Greenpeace (2009) *Airplot!* Video <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2JDe3lRvj10> accessed 13/02/2011
- Hands, J (2011) *@ is for Activism* London: Pluto Press
- Hawkes A. (2011) 'National Audit Office to investigate UK tax deals with multinationals' *Guardian* 19 Jan 2011 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/business/2011/jan/19/national-audit-office-investigate-multinational-tax> accessed 13/02/2011
- Heath, J. and Potter, A. (2006) *The Rebel Sell: How the counter culture became consumer culture* Oxford: Capstone
- Hopkins R. (2006) *The Transition Handbook: From oil dependency to local resilience* Totnes: Green Books
- James, O. (2007) *Affluenza* London: Vermillion
- Johnson, N. (2010) *Separate and Unequal: how integration can deliver the good society*, London: The Fabian Society
- Latour, B. (1993) *We Have Never Been Modern*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press
- Little, B ed. (2010) *Radical Future: Politics for the next generation* London: Lawrence and Wishart [www.lwbooks.co.uk/ebooks/radicalfuture.html](http://www.lwbooks.co.uk/ebooks/radicalfuture.html) accessed 13/02/2011
- Mattelart, A (2003) *The Information Society: An Introduction* London: Sage
- NEF (2002) *Ghost Town Britain: the threat of economic globalisation to livelihoods, liberty and local economic freedom* [http://www.neweconomics.org/sites/neweconomics.org/files/Ghost\\_Town\\_Britain.pdf](http://www.neweconomics.org/sites/neweconomics.org/files/Ghost_Town_Britain.pdf) accessed 13/02/2011

NEF (2008) *Co-Production: A manifesto for growing the core economy*  
[http://www.neweconomics.org/sites/neweconomics.org/files/Ghost\\_Town\\_Britain.pdf](http://www.neweconomics.org/sites/neweconomics.org/files/Ghost_Town_Britain.pdf) accessed 13/02/2011

Porter, H (2009) 'The Great "Big State" Debate' in *the Guardian* 9th December 2009  
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/henryporter/2009/dec/09/big-state-hansard-society-civil-liberties%20> accessed 13/02/2011

Saeed, A (2008) 'Between Marx and Mohammed: Class politics and British Muslims' in Ben Little (ed.) *Class and Culture Soundings Debates*  
[http://www.lwbooks.co.uk/journals/soundings/class\\_and\\_culture/saeed.html](http://www.lwbooks.co.uk/journals/soundings/class_and_culture/saeed.html) accessed 13/02/2011

Sieyes (1789) *What is The Third Estate?* <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/sieyes.html> accessed 13/02/2011

Burghart, D. and Zeskind L. (2010) 'Tea Party Nationalism: A Special Investigation' *Searchlight Magazine* 424 Oct 2010

Weber, M (1918) *Politics as a Vocation*  
[http://www.ne.jp/asahi/moriyuki/abukuma/weber/lecture/politics\\_vocation.html](http://www.ne.jp/asahi/moriyuki/abukuma/weber/lecture/politics_vocation.html) accessed 13/02/2011

Webster (2006) *Theories of the Information Society* 3rd Edition Abingdon: Routledge

Wilkinson, R and Pickett, K. (2009) *The Spirit Level: Why more equal societies nearly always do better* London: Allen Lane

Zittrain, J (2008) *The Future of the Internet: And how to avoid it* New Haven, London: Yale University Press

## **Biographies**

Dr Ben Little is a lecturer in media and cultural studies at Middlesex University. He writes for, and is on the editorial board of, *Soundings* and has edited an eBook and an online debate for the journal. He also co-founded the discussion forum Left-Over Lunches and writes about the relationship between politics and comic books.

Deborah Grayson is a professional activist and writer. She is currently co-writing a book about drug harms with David Nutt, former chief scientist on the UK's Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs, and works for the Yes to Fairer Votes campaign. She has previously been an organizer for Climate Rush, the Spartans, and The Cuts Won't Work and is on the False Economy working group. She also directs opera.