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Background: Muslim Political Mobilizations in Britain

Since the late 1980s, British Muslim activism developed a distinctly religious character. Some scholars interpret the emergence of a distinctly religious Muslim leadership as the result of Muslim agency, which challenged the dominant basis of the race equality framework at the time (Meer, 2010; Modood, 1990, 2005, 2009); whereas others perceived this to be state-sponsored attempt to co-opt sections of ethnic minority leadership, fragmenting a more critical anti-racist politics, and resulting in a more conservative generation of political leadership amongst ethnic minorities (Kundnani, 2007; Sivanadan, 1990). Regardless of the interpretation, however, it was clear that during the 1980s the distinctly religious character of the political mobilization of Muslim groups ran into tensions with the existing anti-racist movement and the left more widely. This tension was further exasperated by a conflict with feminist political mobilizations. Although, there were already long-standing frictions between anti-racism and feminism, these came to a head over the Rushdie Affair and the formation of Women Against Fundamentalism.

The ‘War on Terror’ had an important influence on these existing dynamics. Since 2001 there have been important changes in the relationship between the political establishment and Muslim organizations. Muslim opposition to the Iraq War saw a breaking down of the relationship between the Labour Party and Muslim organizations. Furthermore, the shift towards counter-terror imperatives since the 7 July 2005 terrorist attacks in London led to changes in the types of organizations that the government negotiated with. The government sought a range of new Muslim interlocutors. Some have argued the new relationship between Muslim organizations and the state has been to some extent pluralized (O’Toole et al., 2013). In contrast, I argue that this has been pursued through disciplinary mechanisms which led to the
exclusion and marginalization of many Muslims. However, tensions between the state and some Muslims organizations, groups and individuals played some role in opening up political possibilities for new formations: one being the relationship between leftists and Muslims in the anti-War-on-Terror movement.

The visibility of Muslim mobilizations

The distinct visibility of a Muslim-focused mobilization in Britain can be traced back to what has now become known as the Honeyford affair. In January 1984, Ray Honeyford, a headteacher of a local authority school in Bradford, where the majority of students were of Pakistani decent, made some very critical remarks in the Salisbury Review about the negative effects of Pakistani cultural practices on the education of Pakistani students. This led to mobilizations on behalf of anti-racist activists and the local Pakistani community, calling for Honeyford to resign. A public debate erupted, in which Ray Honeyford was supported by large sections of the media, which attacked the political correctness and anti-racist policies of schools (Ansari, 2004: 322).

This had the long-term effect of empowering the Pakistani community and in particular the mosque leadership, in becoming a political force in Bradford (Modood, 2009). Vertovec (2002) comments on how: ‘The case was important in so far as it raised consciousness and the will to voice concerns among Muslims about issues of stereotyping, discrimination, and the treatment of Muslim needs within public institutions’ (Vertovec, 2002: 23).

Yet it was the mobilizations by Muslims against the publication of Salman Rushdie’s, *Satanic Verses* at the end of the 1980s, which marked an important turning point in the development of ethno-religious assertiveness on the part of Britain’s minorities. The book provoked anger amongst Muslims for its portrayal of the Prophet Muhammad and other revered figures. British Muslims began mobilizing within Muslim organizations and making political claims on the basis of their religious identity as Muslims. First, they campaigned for an extension of the blasphemy law. This began a process of Muslim engagement with a debate about the condition of minorities in Britain and its relation to race equality policies (Modood, 1990: 157). The period between 1988 and 2005 saw a close relationship between the most influential Muslim organization and government minsters (O’Toole et al., 2013). The UK Action Committee on Islamic Affairs (UKACIA), which later broadened into Muslim Council of Britain (MCB), became the organizational organ