2
Muslim Political Participation and Mobilisation in Britain and France

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a chronological account of the participation of ‘Muslim migrants’ and their descendants in social movements and contentious politics in the two countries under study in the post-war period. It traces the history of this participation in various political struggles from the 1950s to the 1990s. In particular, it charts the rise of identity politics and how these actors came to define themselves as ‘Muslims’. The chapter presents a set of dimensions that are useful in explaining Muslim participation in the alter-globalisation movement (explored further in Chapter 3) as well as the reactions to this (the subject of Chapter 5). Participation within the emerging movement against neo-liberal globalisation, at least for many of the older Muslim activists who were interviewed, was the logical consequence of their involvement in previous political struggles and left-wing activism. This chapter demonstrates the continuity of mobilisation from the first generation of migrants to the second generation that was raised in Britain and France. It also sheds light on the origins of some of the groups that later took part in the ESF process.

Talking about ‘Muslim participation’ of course necessitates picking the Muslim ‘strands’ out of the general narrative of the history of post-colonial migrants and their political struggles (Mahamdallie 2007). The focus here is on the political participation of North Africans in France and those originating from the Indian subcontinent in Britain. In the latter case, such activism involved those of various faiths (and none). Yet this was not really an issue because religious identity was subordinate to an ‘Asian’ or ‘Black’ identity.¹ In France too, despite arriving
from Muslim majority countries, their ‘Arab’ identity was much more prominent. In fact, it was only during the 1990s that these ‘Asians’ and ‘Arabs’ started mobilising as ‘Muslims’. This chapter traces this development and pays close attention in particular to the mobilisation of the ‘second generation’ in each country, that is, those who were either born in Europe or who arrived there as young children. One could have started this history by looking at political activism before decolonisation. Emigrants in Europe helped to achieve independence back home by founding organisations such as the Étoile Nord Africaine (ENA) in France and the Indian Workers Association (IWA) in the United Kingdom. Political mobilisations during the period of colonial rule had a significant influence on later struggles in the post-colonial métropole. This chapter concentrates on those demands made by post-colonial migrants in the post-war era that were aimed at gaining social and political rights – from strikes in the workplace to the fight against racism. It then focuses on the movements that were initiated by their children.

**Early struggles by post-colonial migrants in Britain**

There has been an Asian presence in Britain for the last 400 years (Visram 2002). However, it was not until after the partition of India in 1947 that migrants from the former ‘jewel in the crown of the empire’ started to arrive in large numbers. The 1948 Nationality Act gave those living in Commonwealth countries the right to British citizenship and therefore the right of entry and settlement on the British mainland. The vast majority of migrants to Britain from the Indian subcontinent came in order to fulfil labour shortages during the 1950s and 1960s. A second wave of immigration began during the 1970s: first, from Bangladesh after the war of independence in 1971 and then with the arrival of Asian communities which had fled from Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania, Malawi and Zanzibar. Life was hard for the vast majority of Asian migrants to Britain in the post-war period. They were often obliged to work unsocial hours for rates of pay and conditions that were less favourable than those of their native British counterparts. Even if they were unionised and had been in their jobs longer than others, they were often the first to be dismissed in times of redundancies which undermined the ‘last in, first out’ principle (Wrench 2000).

Their socio-economic situation created fertile conditions for involvement in leftist activism, although it is important not to overstress the level of such involvement. Indeed, ‘not every South Asian migrant to