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Dynamics of power in Dutch integration politics

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Integration politics in the Netherlands has changed dramatically between 1990 and 2005. Whereas ethnic and religious differences were hitherto pacified through accommodation, a new and increasingly powerful current in Dutch politics problematized the presence of minorities. Celebrity politicians like Ayaan Hirsi Ali and Pim Fortuyn disrupted the pragmatic political culture that had traditionally characterized the Netherlands and argued for confrontation rather than consensus. Culturalism – a discourse organized around the idea that our (enlightened, liberal, Dutch) culture should be defended against (ethnic and Islamic) minority cultures – grew into a powerful force. This development represents a challenge to sociologists and political scientists: how to map and explain drastic changes? Arguing that extant approaches are better at explaining continuity than change, this dissertation develops a distinct approach to the study of dynamic power relations through a dialogue with various social theorists, including Jeffrey Alexander, Pierre Bourdieu and Norbert Elias. An empirical analysis of opinion articles in broadsheet newspapers shows how a relatively small number of culturalists managed to dominate the debate on integration. At a local level, Culturalism interacted with other discourses and inherited institutions in surprising ways. In the city of Rotterdam, dominated by culturalists, minority associations retained their autonomy. In Amsterdam, where culturalists were virtually absent, minority associations were either marginalized or instrumentalized. Accounting for these unexpected results, the dissertation not only sheds new light on minority politics in the Netherlands but also provides a theoretical contribution to the study of changing power relations.

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