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Dynamics of power in Dutch integration politics

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1. Introduction: integration politics and the enigma of power

Movements for cultural protectionism have proliferated in recent years throughout Europe and many other parts of the world. The idea that immigration and multiculturalism are the natural and inevitable side-effects of globalization has been discredited. The arrival of poor migrants is no longer seen as the logical consequence of an internationalizing labor market, but as an invasion of aliens. Multiculturalism is no longer seen as the epitome of liberal democracy, but as an ideology that undermines society's ability to respond to the reprehensible ideas and practices of minorities. Parties on the left reluctantly accede that immigration causes problems, while right-wing parties adamantly argue that liberal democracies have been too soft, too accommodating, too understanding. I refer to these notions as *Culturalism*, a discourse organized around the idea that the world is divided into cultures and that our enlightened, liberal culture should be defended against the claims of minorities committed to illiberal religions and ideologies.

The Netherlands is often considered an exemplary case of a country where multiculturalism has been abandoned in favor of policies that demand and enforce integration. In 1991, Frits Bolkestein, the leader of the right-wing Liberals, argued that the culture of the West was very different from – and vastly superior to – Islam. He claimed that the integration of minorities had failed and that this was due to the too-accommodating stance of multiculturalists and welfare workers. Since Bolkestein made his intervention in 1991, discursive assaults against multiculturalism, Islam, welfare workers, and the left have proliferated. After Frits Bolkestein came Paul Scheffer, after Paul Scheffer came Pim Fortuyn, after Pim Fortuyn came Ayaan Hirsi Ali and after Ayaan Hirsi Ali came Geert Wilders. What matters now is not the background of these individuals or the particulars of their ideas (we will come to that) but the fact that they were, without exception, culturalists. It is therefore not surprising that Baukje Prins argued in 2004 that “Bolkestein’s plea against taboos, for the defense of Western values and for the necessity of tough measures ... has achieved a definite victory” (Prins, 2004, p. 13). Many other observers have come to the same conclusion, even if they have not used the same terms. Ellie Vasta (2007) speaks of a transformation of the “minorities policy” into a “majority policy”; Han Entzinger (2003) chronicles the “fall of multiculturalism.” Willem Schinkel (2008) argues that a discourse that he refers to as “culturism” has been dominant since the 1990s. Han Entzinger (2003) discusses the “fall of multiculturalism” and Peter Scholten (2007) speaks of the “rise of assimilationism.” These

scholarly observations echo journalistic accounts which portray the Netherlands as a country that has moved from tolerance to intolerance or, if they tended more towards Culturalism, from naïveté towards realism.

The question that immediately impresses itself upon the analyst of integration politics is: *why*? Why did Culturalism come to dominate in a country that was so accommodating of minorities? This question concerns me here as well, though I will have reason to rephrase it. But before answering or even rephrasing the question, we need to attend to a claim that usually appears so trivial that it remains unexamined. When commentators claim that Culturalism (or any other discourse, ideology or sentiment) “dominates,” they rarely, if ever, elaborate on what this domination entails. I would like to problematize this very idea of Culturalism’s dominance in the Netherlands – not to deny Culturalism’s strength, but to better probe the manifestations and limitations of its power. What, exactly, is a discourse? What do we mean when we say that a discourse is “strong” or “dominant”? How do we measure the growth or decline in the power of a discourse? And how to explain such dynamics of power? These questions have relevance far beyond the case of integration politics in the Netherlands as they touch upon problems that have plagued (and inspired) social science from its inception, such as the interplay of the material and symbolic dimensions of politics and the causes of social change. Because of its volatility and dynamism, Dutch integration politics provides an interesting and challenging case to think through some of the theoretical, conceptual and methodological questions that emerge when we want to better understand the dynamics of power.

Since policy concerns motivate much of the research on integration, it is perhaps helpful if I indicate straight away that my goal is *not* to develop a view on integration or to propose measures to promote it. Neither is my goal to criticize Culturalism or any other discourse. If we want to understand why a discourse generates support, the last thing we want to do is to qualify or correct the arguments of its proponents. However frustrating it may be for analysts to postpone judgment, the key to explaining why actors promote certain discourses is to understand why they do so, not why they should not. This also implies that we should not analyze discourses as emerging from uncivil motives, as antagonists in integration politics routinely do when they posit that their opponents support a certain position because they are prejudiced, naive, scared, ignorant, racist, opportunistic and so on. My goal is not to take sides but to understand how actors take sides and to explain why they win or lose.

But how, then, to explain the emergence of Culturalism or, for that matter, other developments in integration politics? Conventional approaches, I argue in the next chapter,

have difficulties answering this question because they assume continuity rather than change, domination rather than contention. Although I draw heavily on Pierre Bourdieu, his work, too, sometimes lapses into an absolutist and static understanding of power relations. His notion of symbolic power, for instance, is defined in such a way that it refers only to power relations that are accepted by the dominant as well as the dominated. The major benefit of such a conceptualization is that it enables the researcher to identify one – crucial, foundational, essential – logic of power. But especially when we consider a case as dynamic and contentious as Dutch integration politics, we should start from the assumption that there is no single logic governing conflict. It is exactly the struggle *between* different ideas and notions – articulated through integration discourses and embodied by antagonists – which this study examines.

The purpose of this study is therefore to foreground the *politics* of integration and to develop an approach that captures the contentious *dynamics* of struggles over religion and culture. Politics is, as Harold Lasswell famously said, about “who gets what, when and how” (Lasswell, 1936). But it is also about how people see and how they are seen. Interpretative scholars have shown that politics does not consist exclusively of the ordering and processing of endogenous preferences, but is also about the interpretation of reality, the demarcation of symbolic boundaries and the mobilization of sentiments. While politics has never been entirely instrumental, it has become more ostentatiously symbolic now that the media communicate images and sounds with increasing intensity and velocity (Hajer, 2009). The media, in turn, is not a unified apparatus but a complex constellation of stages, producers and publics. The questions that Lasswell associated with the political sciences are now inextricably interwoven with the questions he associated with communication – “who says what, to whom, in what channel, and with what effect?” (Lasswell, 1948, p. 37).

Precisely for these reasons, a political science or political sociology of integration cannot do without discourse analysis. Discourse analysis shows how classifications, categorizations and labels serve to maintain or transform power relations, how settings of communication influence interactions and how the meaning of events becomes subject to discursive struggle. Discourse analysis has advanced political science and political sociology by opening up to investigation the ways in which actors negotiate their understandings, not just their interests. I feel, however, that its practitioners have too often presented discourse analysis as an *alternative* to more traditional approaches that aim to uncover objective relations. Whereas the systematic, quantitative analyses of traditional researchers are systematically blind to the meaning and drama of politics, discourse analysis, with some

notable exceptions, has focused on the interpretation of images, performances and texts. To avoid the easy but lethal criticism that discourse analysis presents “just another take” on reality, it is necessary to ground interpretative analysis in an approach that acknowledges and identifies the objective relations that structure subjective interpretations. This study therefore incorporates the analysis of social inequalities and institutional structures into discourse analysis. To understand why discourses originate and why they prevail, we need to systematically research the figurations in which they are mobilized and through which they accrue meaning. This implies that we should not study Culturalism as a singular discursive order that engulfs the totality of society but rather as a force that emerges from, and transforms, political fault lines. To understand its rise to power and to appreciate the ambivalences and limitations of that power, we need to develop a relational perspective and probe the interactions between (actors promoting) this discourse and (actors promoting) other discourses. The central question that this dissertation thus seeks to answer is: *How and why did power relations transform in Dutch integration politics between 1980 and 2006?*¹

The plan of the current study is to first elaborate, in Chapter 2, my approach for answering this central question. The question is then divided into two parts. Part II focuses on the integration *debate* and analyzes opinion articles on integration that were published in three broadsheet newspapers. Part III investigates the *governance* of integration and focuses specifically on the relations between the government and minority associations in Amsterdam and Rotterdam. Part IV draws together the main findings, provides answers to the research question and explores the study’s relevance beyond Dutch integration politics.