

Article

## Gender Knowledge, and Opposition to the Feminist Project: Extreme-Right Populist Parties in the Netherlands

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### Abstract

This article aims to better understand current opposition to feminist politics by analyzing positions of extreme-right populist parties on gender knowledge, “explicit and implicit representations concerning the differences between the sexes and the relations between them, the origins and normative significance of these, the rationale and evidence underpinning them and their material form” (Cavaghan, 2017, p. 48). These understandings contribute to constructing a societal truth on gender and/or to setting the terms of the political debate about gender issues. This article introduces and uses the theoretical concept of episteme to highlight the systematic nature of discursive institutional settings, and the role knowledge and truth production plays in processes reproducing or countering gender inequality. The article analyzes the positions of extreme-right populist parties in the Netherlands and their discursive attacks on the feminist project in the Netherlands, in which these opponents use a redefined concept of ‘cultural Marxism’. Through this analysis, the article illustrates the theoretical argument that epistemic dynamics play a strong role in opposition to feminist politics, that the shifting epistemic framing of science is important in these oppositions and that more comprehensive attention for the epistemic dimension is needed.

### Keywords

episteme; Europe; extreme right; sciences; gender equality; gender knowledge; political party; sexual equality; social complexity theory; the Netherlands

### Issue

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### 1. Introduction

Extreme-right populist parties often express strong positions against feminism and feminists, frequently oppose sexual equality and are vocal against abortion rights (Köttig, Bitzan, & Pető, 2017). This article argues that the problem that extreme-right populist parties pose for the feminist project (Walby, 2011) is not just linked to their political positioning on gender and sexuality. To better understand the impact these parties may have on the feminist project, we need to analyze their positioning on gender and sexuality in conjunction with their understanding of, and positioning on, knowledge and truth in our societies. This article first explores this more theoretically, drawing on Walby’s social complexity theory. In the

second section, the article presents a concise analysis of the specific positions the two major extreme-right populist parties in the Netherlands have taken on gender and sexuality, and of their positions on knowledge and truth. The current discursive attack on the feminist project, in which opponents redefine the concept of “cultural Marxism” (see Jamin, 2014, also for information on the roots of this concept in the US far right) to bundle the broader social justice projects in the Netherlands together and attack them, illustrates this article’s argument that epistemic dynamics play a very strong role in opposition to feminist politics, that in political dynamics the shifting epistemic position of science is important and that more comprehensive attention for the epistemic dimension is needed. This analysis leads to conclusions that call for

more attention to the analysis of gender knowledge in grasping the damaging potential of extreme-right populist parties for the feminist project in Europe.

## 2. Truth Claims, Power and Feminist Politics

All political projects, whether pushing for social justice and equality or against it, whether striving for societal change or actively engaging to conserve a certain status quo, need stories, framings of what they do and why, in order to focus their activities, mobilize followers and leaders, and find out which alliances can work for them and which resources and opportunities they can access (Lombardo, Meier, & Verloo, 2009; Tarrow, 2011). Thus, they need and benefit greatly from comprehensive narratives that compellingly articulate what is currently wrong and needs to change or what is worthwhile conserving, why that is, and which actors and institutions are currently constructing the world in a right or wrong way for their project. Good stories increase political projects' chances of successful mobilization and action. Such stories are stronger and more useful if they offer not just a compelling diagnosis, but also an articulated prognosis showing visions, objectives, strategies and potential measures to push for, or activities to engage in. They are also stronger if they are credible, that is, if these stories make a convincing truth claim about what constitutes our reality.

To better understand the current opposition to feminist politics in Europe, it is thus crucial to investigate not just which actors are against it or where they find their resources, but also what kind of comprehensive and credible narratives are used as part of these oppositional activities. To do so, this article builds on the social-movement concept of (master) frames (Benford, 2013), and links it to the theoretical concept of episteme to highlight the role knowledge and truth production plays in processes that reproduce or counter gender and sexual inequality. In doing so, it also underlines the systematic nature of the discursive institutional settings involved. The aim is to improve our understanding of opposition to the feminist project in Europe and of the role that the discursive dimension of power plays in this opposition.

At the heart of the discursive dimension of power is what Giddens (1984) calls "signification", the meaning given to reality using interpretative schemes, or, in other words, the social definition of reality: what is what, and what is its role in our social world. This signification dimension of power is highly significant in opposition to feminist politics. Signification is not reducible to the normative: there might be different understandings of who "is" a parent in our society (and that in itself is indeed a normative positioning), but such a signification can be combined with different normative positions on who is a "good" or "proper" or "normal" parent. Signification is a power dimension in its own right because of its power to define reality. In the words of Thomas and Thomas: "If men define situations as real, they are real in their conse-

quences" (1928, p. 572). Signification's specific strength is that it can fly under the radar: it defines not how the world should be—or at least this is not the obvious message—but how it actually "is". Successful signification involves making real truths. If the world "is" a certain way, this establishes a truth about reality, reducing the available options on how to act upon and within the world (Verloo, 1992).

To understand opposition to feminist politics, a crucial and obvious part of the signification dimension is the way gender and gender relations are defined, understood and given meaning. This is extremely complex. Gender relations are multilevel and multidimensional, located in all social domains, and deeply connected to other social relations. And as the world is deeply social, none of this is fixed, and everything is in flux. Human beings make conscious decisions about this gendered world and their positioning in it, but often just routinely follow the gendered tracks or scripts that history provides in their contexts. These omnipresent gendered tracks or scripts provide deeply engrained truths about gender and gender relations. In all domains of life, the gender-unequal configurations of the past offer the material that people use to live their lives, and provide the words and signs people use to be accepted and understood by others. In doing so, people reproduce and to some degree reorganize these gendered tracks, these gendered words, this gendered world. Knowledge and truth on all dimensions and levels of gender thus is a crucial part of gender relations and of gender inequality regimes. As gender permeates all dimensions of social life, everybody can be seen to have their own particular "gender knowledge", and their "durable gendered assumptions are enmeshed in local understandings of 'mainstream' issues and local practices" (Cavaghan, 2017, p. 43). Such knowledge on gender combines answering the signification question, "what is gender?", with normative positions on when and how gender is done "right" in often hard-to-untangle ways, and establishes and enacts truths about gender.

Feminist collective action—focused collective political pressure to change an element of gender inequality regimes—has always included feminist knowledge production on what gender is, on how to understand the gendered world, and has introduced new truth claims about gender. New concepts have been developed in feminist collective action that enable distancing from the scripts which are constitutive of gender inequality regimes. Feminist consciousness-raising groups (and other separate "public" spheres, see Fraser's critique of Habermas, 1990) were set up precisely to create spaces where women could develop new meanings of what is it to be a woman, or be feminine, in a patriarchal world. The second wave excelled in developing new institutions (however temporary) solely devoted to feminist knowledge production and the transfer of such knowledge: bookshops and publishing houses, libraries, archives, journals, radio and television programs,

movies and movie production and distribution companies, new branches in churches, education programs, and women's and gender studies research and teaching (Evans, 1995). In the 21st century, we see similar (and some ongoing) initiatives, although they are not as often independent of larger institutions: feminist blogs, academic gender studies programs, gender training, and courses against gender stereotyping in schools (McLean & Maalsen, 2013).

As a project to change society, feminism has played and continues to play an important role in producing knowledge and truth about gender that is compatible with, and useful for, the fight for social justice. This knowledge comprises *non-essentialist* understandings of gender, *empirical* data on the lives of people disaggregated on gender, race, class, and sexuality, and understandings of the *dynamics* of gender inequality in and across domains (including the role of knowledge) and of the *intersectional* dynamics between different regimes of inequality such as class, ethnicity/race and sexuality (see also Disch & Hawkesworth, 2016). Feminist gender knowledge is embedded in broader understandings of the world and of how inequalities are made and conserved (Brown, 2006), about the world at large and about how societal change comes about.

Opposition to feminist politics can target all women or only specific groups of women at intersections of other inequality regimes such as class, sexuality or race (Farris, 2012; hooks, 1981; Puar, 2013; Wekker, 2016). When opposition to feminist politics takes the form of a political project to change society, as recently seems to be happening in Europe and the Western world (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017; Verloo, 2018), it engages prominently in activities of knowledge production about gender and gender relations that fit its goal (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017). To better understand opposition to gender+equality and feminist politics, we therefore need to analyze where and how which knowledge on gender is produced, and how the truth claims of opponents to gender equality and social justice become credible or dominant. Aside from analyzing what these actors do and say, a good starting point for this is to identify the domains in which this knowledge production and transfer happens. This article argues that there is a domain, here called episteme, where such knowledge and truth production forms the core of several major institutions.

In this article, gender knowledge will be understood as:

Explicit and implicit representations concerning the differences between the sexes and the relations between them, the origins and normative significance of these, the rationale and evidence underpinning them and their material form". (Cavaghan, 2017, p. 48)

Oppositions to "gender" then also are projects of "alternative knowledge production" (Bracke & Paternotte, 2016, p. 144), which produce *knowledges* that can—and

should—be compared to other knowledges (such as those within the feminist project).

### 2.1. Knowledge and Truth Production and Societal Domains

Social complexity theory (Walby, 2009) is a promising way of addressing issues related to opposition to feminist politics (Verloo, 2018), because it offers a set of concepts (path dependency, co-evolving, positive and negative feedback loops) that theorize how changes in one system relate to changes in other systems. Walby distinguishes four domains—economy, polity, violence and civil society—that together constitute society. The four domains work as separate systems, each with their own dominant actors and institutions, and they function as each other's environment, meaning that changes in one domain impact other domains. A simple example of this is how changes in the polity—say the coming to power of parties that loosen restrictions on capitalist exploitation—have a strong impact on the economy—because they strengthen actors and institutions that exploit workers. I here propose a differentiation within what Walby calls the domain of civil society. More specifically, I propose to distinguish episteme (a system that produces and organizes knowledge and truth, located strongly in social fields such as religion, education, media and research) as a fifth and separate domain.

### 2.2. Episteme as a System

While all societal domains have a discursive dimension underpinning their rationale and *modus operandi*—or, probably more accurately, they contain sets of struggles over rationales and *modi operandi* resulting in the temporary hegemony of some of them—episteme is the one domain whose whole *raison d'être* lies in the discursive dimension of society: defining the meaning of life, not to mention reality, knowledge and truth. In this domain, we find several powerful institutions, those dealing with religion, sciences and education, and media being the most important ones. These institutions have mechanisms in place that create knowledge and truth claims, as well as mechanisms for transfer of these. They also impact opportunities for creating knowledge and truth on gender. Changes in these epistemic institutions are related to changes in domains such as polity, economy and violence. More specifically, these changes impact the emergence, strength or success of opposition to feminist politics. Opposition to feminist politics is shaped by the emergence of oppositional ideas about sex and gender and its success depends on the strength of the actors and institutions producing or successfully claiming oppositional gender "truths".

*Religion*, as a set of social institutions, is based on assumptions that god-given truths exist and are transmitted to believers through mediators such as priests. Religions always have specific institutions and elites that pro-

duce, guard and transfer their truths (beliefs) to their followers, and these may or may not be given space by the polity in which they operate. Obviously, the more space they are given, the stronger their truth-claiming power and the weaker democratic control over it. All religions have specific understandings of gender relations that are predominantly essentialist (meaning that they see a god-given nature of who men and women are as dual and complementary categories of human beings that have different, god-given roles in society). These essentialist and heteronormative truths on gender are often combined with sanctions on deviations. Before the Enlightenment, religion was the primary and dominant institutional actor that produced (gender) knowledge about society. It also dominated educational institutions and had their own media for knowledge transfer. Though secularization diminishes this power, religion kept some of this truth power, as well as many of its educational institutions and media, even after the Enlightenment, however. Religion's truth-constructing power is strongly connected to positions religious actors acquire in the polity (like the Catholic or Orthodox churches, Islamic religious actors or Hindu religious elites have in some countries), and to the ways in which they can acquire powerful positions in the economy (see US tax exemptions that enrich US churches), or have state-sponsored violence at their disposal as a sanction measure (Islamic imams in Islamist sharia states). In Europe, the oppositional drive of the centralized Roman Catholic church is well documented, as is its essentialist understanding of sex, sexuality and gender (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017). Even more importantly, in these times of secularization religious institutions have been observed to shift "from God to science", substituting their oppositional truth claims from god-given dogmas or biblical discourse, to what appears to be a rational, scientific discourse molded into reassuring and populist common-sense statements (Kuhar, 2015, p. 87). A strong example of this is the current oppositional religious discourse against "gender theory" that originates in the writings of the last three popes and a network of actors around them (Case, 2016), and is found in oppositional actions against feminism and sexual equality across many Catholic countries in Europe (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017).

*Media* is a set of institutions dealing with information as something of value, and with the transfer of information. They can be profit based or not, meaning that the value of information can be that it is sellable or otherwise valuable. Media is a strong intermediary institution in society that transfers and translates knowledge and truths produced in other domains to society at large. Media institutions create knowledge by combining information elements and presenting them in various appealing ways. Media institutions are often segregated, reaching certain specific segments of the population (think of the Dutch system of public broadcasting based on religious and political cleavages). This enables them to create intersubjective truths based on an assumed common ground. In

the current mediascape, a high frequency of statements (in a segregated media context) seems the main driver of truth production: truth is produced if enough people say it. Media institutions are also increasingly commercial and dominated by market logic. The emergence and widespread use of social media has introduced a new logic in all media (Van Dijck & Poell, 2013), leading to information bubbles, "echo chambers" (Sunstein, 2018) or "discursive cocoons" (Alvares & Dahlgren, 2016) in which truth claims can be made and validated without a rational basis, creating what some call a post-truth society. A better term would be post-rational truth society, as it is not the truth that has disappeared, but the facts and arguments producing it. The concept of post-truth politics refers to intricate links between the polity and media by which powerful media support hegemonic (or wannabe hegemonic) polity actors making truth claims that are not based on rational facts. It also refers to polity-media configurations that deliberately create confusion so as to facilitate non-fact-based but regime-friendly truth claims (Pomerantzev, 2014). Media's truth-constructing power is strongly connected to accessibility (the higher the accessibility, the stronger the potential truth-claiming power, hence the power of social media), and to powerful institutional actors' support or restrictions in other domains such as the polity or economy (censorship, monopolies, resources).

*Sciences* as a set of institutions is based mostly on rationality, considered the only proper way to acquire knowledge, combined with objectivity (or refutability), setting the institutional conditions for developing knowledge and scientific truth. The Enlightenment has given science the dominant role of knowledge and truth production in the Western world, and this has been extended to education and educational knowledge transfer. Yet that rationality has many faces. Within science there are paradigms that adhere to a principle of proof, preferring the collection of objective facts and the quest for causality, and paradigms that adhere to a principle of questioning, preferring the power of argument and logical thinking. A paradigm that takes this questioning to the point of not assuming any reality before thought is called poststructuralism. The concept of co-production (Jasanoff, 2004) transcends these different competing paradigms by arguing that the ways in which we know and represent the world are inseparable from the ways we choose to live in it. The current production of knowledge on gender can be found across all these paradigms.

Knowledge production in academic and educational institutions is currently challenged in many ways. The neoliberalization of academia has seriously limited the potential for slow science and education and now offers incentives for researchers and teachers to base their decisions on a market logic (Ferree & Zippel, 2015). Moreover, a number of scandals have harmed science's reputation of integrity in pursuing its goals (Stroebe, Postmes, & Spears, 2012). Those disciplines that have the study of sex and gender at its core (women's studies in the

past, gender studies or gender and diversity studies in recent times) have shown how mechanisms such as old boys' networks, numerical gender inequality in high academic positions and the low status of women academics and gender studies are detrimental to the production of much-needed knowledge on gender-inequality processes. At present, the reduced funding for the social sciences and humanities, the sharp increase of precarious labor in academia (Ferree & Zippel, 2015; Poggio, 2018; Viseu, 2015) and the endangerment of autonomous research by market logic and political interference (Grimm & Saliba, 2017) all decrease the status and authority of these disciplines and the overall democratic transparency in knowledge production and transfer.

This short discussion on the role of the three main epistemic institutions in the production of knowledge shows that religion's role should not be neglected, because a new master frame with strong Catholic roots has an observable impact on opposition to the feminist project in Europe. It also shows that new media developments have contributed to post-rational truth politics, and that the space in academia to further develop gender knowledge that is useful to counter gender inequality is shrinking.

In the next section, I will illustrate how opposition to the feminist political project for social justice and equality is affected by (discursive) actions of extreme-right political parties in the Netherlands, not just directly, by the ways these parties oppose "gender", but also indirectly, by the positions these parties take on epistemic institutions and truth production.

### **3. The Gendered Politics of Knowledge in Extreme-Right Populist Parties**

There are several reasons why it is interesting to analyze the gender knowledge of extreme-right populist parties. One is because of the combination of extreme right and populism. Populism in politics claims that certain attitudes or concepts (such as "the people" or "the nation") are collective, even without evidence of this (Krämer, 2014). The key characteristics of populism, such as simplification or an aversion to complexity (Krämer, 2014; Mueller, 2016), the use of more conflictive anti-elitist messages (Ernst, Engesser, & Esser, 2017) and their anti-pluralist and often authoritarian (Taguieff, 1997) perspectives are interpreted here as epistemic positions that favor certainty over inquiry or reflection, and conflict over deliberation. In Europe today, populism takes a largely extreme right-wing direction (Alvares & Dahlgren, 2016; Mouffe, 2005). The anti-pluralist and authoritarian tendencies of populist parties at the far-right or extreme-right end of the political spectrum are even stronger.

A second reason is due to the specific links that extreme-right populist parties have to epistemic institutions, particularly the media and religion. While mainstream media and social media have become the dominant sites for political debate in late modern democra-

cies, the link between populist parties and especially new media, but also classic media such as tabloids and radio talk shows, is even stronger, and there is substantial resonance between these media and the above-noted populist characteristics (Alvares & Dahlgren, 2016; Ernst et al., 2017). The concept of media populism—the media's use of populist stylistic and ideological elements, viz. the construction and favoritism of in-groups, hostility toward and circumvention of the elites and institutions of representative democracy, reliance on charisma and (group-related) common sense and appeal to moral sentiments—points at this resonance as a factor reinforcing populist parties (Krämer, 2014). Media populism is potentially effective through its priming, its impact on cognitive schemata (representations of the social order), particularly those on social differentiation and identity (Krämer, 2014).

A third reason is that extreme-right populist parties can be closely linked to religious groups with strong essentialist gender knowledge such as anti-gender ideology or anti-gender theory, and, if so, can act as strong diffusion channels for such knowledge.

To illustrate this article's argument that the epistemic dimension of opposition to feminist politics deserves more attention, the next two sections will look at specific statements on gender knowledge and on epistemic institutions from extreme-right populist parties in the Netherlands. I will first look at positions taken on sex, sexuality and gender, then at positions taken on knowledge, knowledge production and truth. The Netherlands scores high on gender equality indices (see EIGE index where it ranked fourth among the EU member states in 2015). The two Dutch extreme-right populist parties that will be discussed are the Partij voor de Vrijheid (PVV), led by Geert Wilders, and the Forum for Democracy (FvD), led by Thierry Baudet. Both are seen as successful in influencing the positions taken by other parties (Bale, Green-Pedersen, Krouwel, Luther, & Sitter, 2010; Schumacher & Van Kersbergen, 2016).

#### *3.1. The Politics of Knowledge in Two Dutch Extreme-Right Parties: Sex, Gender and Sexuality*

Wilders started his PVV not as a regular party with members, but as a "movement" in 2004, after he left the Liberal Conservative party (VVD) over the Dutch (and EU's) strengthened ties with Turkey (Vossen, 2017; Witteveen, 2017). Like other populist parties, he argues against "the elite" (Mudde, 2007) using a strong populist rhetoric. The main item on his political program is to stop the "Islamization" of the Netherlands, seen as driven by "mass immigration" and accommodation of Muslim citizens through multicultural politics (PVV, 2012). On economic and welfare-state issues, the positions taken are on the left; on law and order or on "small" government, his positions are on the right of the political spectrum. While formally defending supposed Dutch/Western values such as reason and equality, he simultaneously at-



tacks existing institutions such as parliament, universities or courts as “fake” (Witteveen, 2017). After the elections of 2017, the PVV has 20 seats in parliament (out of 150), making it the second-largest party.

On gender and sexuality, the Netherlands is seen as an outlier in the European extreme-right landscape, because Wilders’ PVV does not endorse homophobia or the promotion of traditional gender roles as much as extreme-right parties in other European countries do (see Norocel, 2011). Instead, the PVV embraces forms of homonationalism (Puar, 2013) and femonationalism (Farris, 2012) by declaring the Netherlands a country proud of its sexual and gender equality, if not for the Muslim migrants who supposedly do not support these quintessential “Dutch” values. At first sight, gender and sexuality appear to be a non-issue for this party, hardly mentioned in their program or in their parliamentary interventions. De Lange and Mügge (2015, p. 74) conclude that “the PVV cannot be qualified as neo-traditional, modern-traditional or modern due to a lack of statements on classical gender issues”. This conclusion is correct as far as the party’s direct statements in their programs go. The latest PVV election program, in 2017, only one page long, did not mention gender and sexuality issues at all, and was a mix of positions: against Islam and against the European Union, against development aid, for direct democracy and lower taxes, for reversing some austerity measures and for strengthening law and order.

Based on the literature (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2015), the following can be said about the PVV’s “gender knowledge”: gender and sexual equality has already been achieved in the Netherlands, except for groups that refuse this and threaten the progress made (read: Muslims). As the party considers the status quo to be fine and adheres to a liberal understanding of what governments should do (very little), they oppose all gender- and sexual-equality measures. The PVV formally supports full gender equality, but does not consider it a high priority and does not want the state to “force” society to become more equal (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2015). It states that they do not consider women to be a “weak” group that needs state protection, and therefore it opposes all positive discrimination, affirmative action or other “diversity nonsense” (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2015, p. 28; PVV, 2012, p. 25). They are “for gender equality”, but against “gender equality measures”.

Based on this positioning and unlike De Lange and Mügge (2015), I would rather argue that the PVV is against gender equality. I argue that denying existing gender inequality when there is clear evidence of it (Portegijs & van den Brakel, 2016) is a particular form of opposing gender equality (Verloof, 2018). PVV’s femo- and homonationalism adds a further oppositional element, as it does

not come with an interest in women’s rights or sexual rights, but with an interest in blaming parts of the Dutch population. Femo- and homonationalism are obnoxious forms of window-dressing that do not go together well with real action on furthering feminism (see more in the analysis below).

To illustrate the gender knowledge of the PVV, I performed two analyses: (a) one of the PVV’s website<sup>1</sup>, and (b) one of the PVV’s votes in parliament<sup>2</sup>. The website analysis (<https://www.pvv.nl>) showed that gender and sexuality are indeed not a frequently stressed element, and that references to gender and sexual equality are almost always strategically linked to statements about Muslims or Islam. Opposition to gender equality measures is unconcealed, though. When claims for more gender equality or proposals for gender equality measures are mentioned, it is to showcase them as either superfluous or ridiculous, as Beertema, MP, says: “while the politically correct elite is worrying about getting one or two more female professors or with the need for gender-neutral toilets in kindergartens, Islamic mass immigration is destroying what we achieved” (2016, October 2, author’s translation). This illustration shows how the gender and sex status quo is seen as unproblematic, how measures therefore are unneeded, and how the only stated problem is Islam as a threat to sex and gender equality. The PVV never presents itself as an ally to feminism. Whether arguing for a strong punishment for female genital mutilation or offering positive statements about women’s emancipation, the core position is always that gender equality has already been achieved in the Netherlands, and that gender equality is a defining feature of the Dutch national culture which has to be defended against “foreign” influences, most notably Islam. The PVV predominantly defends gender equality (using the Dutch label of women’s emancipation) as a weapon against the alleged “Islamization” of Europe. This position has already been observed for other politicians such as Rita Verdonk (VVD MP and cabinet minister before she started her own party that never made it to parliament), or Ayaan Hirsi Ali (Roggeband & Verloof, 2007), but in the last decades the PVV is the strongest political voice about this. The link between gender equality and Islam is made by depicting Dutch women—often referred to as “our” women, “our” mothers, “our” girls—as feeling or being threatened by the “islamization” of the Netherlands. Such references obviously exclude many Muslim Dutch citizens from being “seen” by the PVV as Dutch. In a speech in Parliament, Wilders said: “we are the Netherlands, and this is our country. And we will reclaim it. Starting today. We will not accept our women and daughters being harassed by you” (2016, September 21, author’s translation). The “you” in this quote is meant to

<sup>1</sup> The website analysis (<https://www.pvv.nl>), performed 15–18 January 2018, involved a keyword search using the following words: *vrouw, emancipatie, gender, wetenschap, homo, diversiteit, Marx* (woman, gender, science, homosexual, diversity, Marx). The texts that had these words were analyzed for their argumentation about gender and sexual equality. The extensive website contains party information and short texts, speeches by Wilders, texts from parliamentary interventions of PVV party members, as well as some newspaper clippings.

<sup>2</sup> The analysis of the votes in parliament was done for the period 2010–2016 with the same keywords, using the [watstemthetparlement.nl](http://www.watstemthetparlement.nl) website, a political-sciences and quality-journalism project led by Tom Louwerse, Amsterdam University (Louwerse, Otjes, & van Vonno, 2018).

be Muslims. This femonationalist position is a de-facto position against gender equality. It should not be interpreted as a position to support women, but only as a position to attack Muslims, because there is no mention whatsoever that women who suffer such attacks should be supported.

The position taken by the PVV on gender equality is increasingly mirrored by other, large and influential parties. Recently, for instance, the Christian Democrats (CDA), in contrast to many of that party's positions since the 1970s, claimed that "women have been equal to men for centuries in our Judeo-Christian society" (Witteveen, 2017) in a very PVV-like argument about how migrants or Muslims threaten gender equality.

The analysis of the PVV votes in parliament (<https://watstemthetparlement.nl>) confirmed most of these findings. The rare votes in favor of women are about the medical domain: access to midwife care (2011, February 17) and sex-specific medicine (2013, December 19). They do not side with the occasional propositions of orthodox Christian parties to restrict abortions (2012, December 11). Other than that, I found no votes in favor of anything related to gender equality policy, measures or budget. On gender equality, the PVV voted against having better indicators, programs for low-educated women, policies against child marriages, and anything on gender equality in development aid. They vote against diversity policies in the police and the army, arguing that all diversity policy is discrimination (2015, April 30). Their femonationalism shows in an initiative to ask for research on "the consequences of 'mass immigration' on sexual and gender equality" (2011, November 22, quotation marks added). Their position on sexual equality runs parallel but is slightly more open: they sometimes vote for a higher budget (2013, December 5) or specific measures against homophobia in schools (2011, June 28). Yet they have also voted against a higher budget for sexual equality (2012, April 3). Their homo-nationalism shows in their voting against evaluating a program on tolerance on homosexuality for migrants (2013, April 16), asking instead for "recognition that Islam is an obstacle to sexual equality" (2011, June 28), voting against a joint approach to hate crimes (meaning across several discrimination grounds) (2011, June 28) and voting in favor of special sanctions against asylum seekers that threaten gay or lesbian asylum seekers (2015, December 15). The PVV's femonationalism and homonationalism show in a strong preference for using gender and sexual equality to blame or sanction "Islam" or "migrants", while nothing is offered for improving the situation.

Thierry Baudet's FvD is more recent than the PVV, developed out of a think tank founded in 2015. In 2010, while he was still a PhD student, Baudet published an op-ed in a Dutch quality newspaper critiquing the European Court of Human Rights, sparking a long public and academic debate (Oomen, 2016). He started more directly engaging in politics by (unsuccessfully) mobilizing for a referendum on the European Union (2013) and more suc-

cessfully mobilizing for a referendum on the trade association with Ukraine in 2015, using the then-new law on advisory referenda (Vossen, 2017). As a think tank, the PVV also commissioned the FvD to report on the need for referenda in Dutch politics.

As the FvD is very new and has only two MPs since March 2017, it is hard to make a sound assessment of their positions. Similarly to the PVV, sex and gender is a non-issue in their official program. They are very active outside of parliament, though. Baudet and MP Hiddema have used newspaper interviews to directly ridicule feminism and to argue against sexual equality and in favor of keeping the country white. There have been anarcho-feminist attacks on Baudet's house which diverted the following public discussion. Since the beginning of 2018, the party has seen strong internal turbulence and a high turnover of important internal positions.

This brief analysis of the "gender knowledge" (Cavaghan, 2017) of extreme-right populist parties in the Netherlands shows that the PVV's position is problematic for the feminist project. Their femonationalism and homonationalism are rooted in their belief that Islam is the only threat to gender and sexual equality, their denial of the problem of gender inequality and their refusal of state responsibility for gender equality. In short, they oppose feminism. For the FvD, it is a bit too early for a serious assessment, but there are clear resonances with the PVV, and both its MPs do not refrain from misogynistic, racist and homophobic statements. To understand the parties' full position, however, it is also necessary to look at what they say and do about knowledge and on knowledge production. This is the topic of the following section.

### *3.2. The Politics of Knowledge in Two Dutch Extreme-Right Parties: Science, Truth and Politics*

Extreme-right parties in Europe are not only united in their position against Islam, but also their position against specific forms of progressive politics and against the knowledge on which that progressive politics is based. This position is articulated strongly in relation to education and to academia, especially the social sciences. One of the concepts used to address the latter is "cultural Marxism", which fits into their argument as follows: there is a specific form of current "Islamization" that uses a more "cultural" strategy enabled by a change in mentalities caused by "cultural Marxism" (Jamin, 2014). In this framing, "cultural Marxism" is a set of tools used by "leftists" and "globalists" to promote a multicultural society and attack all discourses that oppose such a project. It is a diagnosis of an internal threat in Western societies that is seen as supporting the "Islamic invasion" (see also Allen, 2014). The destruction of "our societies" is thus not only seen to be threatened by Islamization but also by this "cultural Marxism". This opens a space for opposing and attacking the social sciences and humanities, explicitly including gender studies.

Comparing the two parties, this position on knowledge is predominantly and most explicitly taken by the new FvD, although it resonates strongly with positions taken by the PVV. What they have in common in their populist anti-elite stance is that they see schools and universities as part of the elite, and as part of a “leftist cabal” that has taken over society. Since its beginnings, the PVV consistently argues in parliament (voiced most strongly by MP Beertema) that Dutch education is politically biased towards leftist and progressive perspectives, that this is “indoctrination” and that especially the PVV is “demonized” by educators all over the country. This translates into positions taken against the social sciences, against gender studies and in favor of more applied technical sciences. It is also linked to a demand that anyone teaching should refrain from taking political positions—this alongside a contradictory demand that teachers should “support Dutch culture”, according to Beertema in several speeches in parliament (2015, May 21; 2001, September 29; 2016, November 3). The PVV’s initiative to ask for a code of conduct in academic research on political motives (2013, December 17) was not supported by any other party (only by one ex-PVV MP). The argument for this initiative was again their claim that science and education too often take an ideological (read: left) perspective. Evidence for this is never provided.

Some academics linked to the FvD have joined in to elaborate on the supposed existence and origin of this so-called cultural Marxism. They do so in the public sphere by publishing op-eds in major newspapers and on blogs where they use hyperbolic language. Paul Cliteur, professor at the Law Faculty in Leiden, published a blog post entitled “Cultural Marxists will not rest before you are subjected” that was warmly received in far-right communities. This blog post depicts cultural Marxism (following Yiannopoulos, 2017) as a “political ideology” based on Gramsci and the Frankfurter Schule which “took over” universities in the 1960s and 70s. In this view, “cultural Marxism” is not a scholarly perspective but an ideology that is “continually finding new groups of oppressed people and that depicts anyone who questions this as a racist or Nazi” (Cliteur, 2017). Because, in their framing, “cultural Marxism” is the entry point for the destruction of society through Islamization, this move links projects for social justice, such as the feminist project (including gender studies), directly to the potential destruction of society. It enables seeing feminism and gender studies (and anti-racism for that matter) as enemies of society. Since March 2018, Cliteur is the director of the Renaissance Institute, which is the scientific institute of the FvD. He continues to be invited for prominent talks by prestigious Dutch academic institutions such as the Royal Academy of Sciences. Cliteur has been joined by other Dutch academics such as Eric Hendriks (University of Beijing, later Bonn), who—in an op-ed in a quality newspaper—depicts the Chinese Cultural Revolution as the most extreme expression of this cul-

tural Marxist ideology (2017). While statements such as these have also received severe criticism, they have managed to define “cultural Marxism” as a reality in Dutch society. As a result, concepts such as intersectionality, white privilege, diversity or institutional racism are now heavily politicized and are drawn into the public debate that the FvD has started, often on their terms. Right-wing online media thrive on the polarization these debates have induced, and they therefore act as important diffusion channels.

As the FvD is a very small party (2 seats out of 150), the strength of FvD’s framing of knowledge production is not linked to their influence in parliament. Their strength lies in influencing public debate and in weakening the reputation of the social sciences and humanities, and the position of scholars working in these disciplines. The position both the PVV and FvD take on knowledge production and on education and science is especially problematic because their claim of “indoctrination in education and social sciences”, or of a “cultural Marxist” conspiracy in education and social sciences is unfounded, yet already successful. Worse, this claim also functions as a shield against any critique, especially from anyone linked to the social sciences and humanities. Any critique is just further direct proof of the “bias” against them. Moreover, the serious reputation damage to the social sciences caused by the success of their “frame” of “cultural Marxism” hinders the future production of feminist knowledge and the future transfer of feminist knowledge to society.

#### 4. Conclusion and Discussion

This article has focused on struggles about gender knowledge, arguing that more attention for the epistemic dimension of debates on gender and sexuality is needed to understand the threat to the feminist project coming from extreme-right populist parties. The example of extreme-right populist parties in the Netherlands illustrates this article’s argument that epistemic dynamics play a strong role in opposition to feminist politics. In contrast to earlier research (De Lange & Mügge, 2015), this article argues that extreme-right populist parties in the Netherlands do take a position on gender equality. These parties, the PVV and FvD, take the femonationalist and homonationalist position that gender (and sexual) equality has been achieved for those parts of the population that matter to them and is only threatened by the actions of those parts of the population that they do not see as part of the Dutch nation. By excluding Muslim Dutch citizens and Dutch citizens with a migration background from the Dutch nation, they already take an anti-feminist position. Moreover, their anti-feminist position also shows in their consistently voting or acting against gender equality measures, and their consistent denial of the existence of gender inequality.

The analysis also shows how the shifting power position of epistemic institutions such as the sciences is of



crucial importance in the political dynamics around gender and sexuality. Extreme-right populist parties are consistently campaigning to frame science, especially the social sciences and education, as extremely biased and as part of the Islamist threat to the nation. This is directly harmful to debates on gender and racial inequalities, but also further weakens the already low status of the social sciences, creating a positive feedback loop in which the more the academic quality of social sciences research is attacked, the easier it becomes for them to attack academic research about gender, ethnicity or sexuality with results unwelcome to them. Extreme-right actors flat out deny that gender-studies knowledge is cognitive or rational at all, reducing it to a set of (in their view) despicable normative positions. Unfortunately, this attack is potentially successful because gender studies has always been seen as merely normative, and academic paradigms such as poststructuralism and constructivism can play into these kinds of arguments. Moreover, under the currently dominant market logic in academia, the need to claim absolute knowledge in order to acquire funding also diminishes the space for critical reflection on knowledge and knowledge production (creating another feedback loop). The two Dutch extreme-right populist parties do not link to epistemic master frames (Benford, 2013) from Catholicism, such as the “gender ideology” frame. Their only reference to religion is in blaming Islam for the (coming) destruction of Dutch society. The frame of “cultural Marxism” they use, however, has similar potential to fuel opposition to the feminist project, and its roots in the US far right also enable cross country alliances. Both parties take a strong position against “elite” media, even if they also profit from them—the FvD has profited much from publishing op-eds in one of the Dutch quality newspapers.

Based on the theoretical argument and the empirical illustrations in this article, I argue that more comprehensive attention for the epistemic dimension is needed. Even if these parties are not in government or, like the FvD, are still very small, they have a strong impact on public debates and on positions taken by larger parties. And even if many of the positions taken on gender knowledge by these parties are weak or even nonsense by academic standards, it would be a mistake not to pay attention to them. We need to reclaim the political engagement of gender and sexuality studies. In these times, any technocratic positioning of gender equality is a trap. Four things are especially needed: In the short term, there is a need for more direct responses by gender scholars in public debates. In the longer term, we need to (re)develop and improve the transfer of feminist positions on knowledge politics. Thirdly, we need more research on how neoliberalism and other broader political developments feed into the disavowal of the social sciences and gender studies through their fueling of polarization and false certainty. And lastly, we need stronger action to safeguard the social sciences and humanities’ status and resources. Aside from continuing our efforts to better understand opposi-

tional dynamics to gender equality and social justice, we need to make the struggle between knowledges on sex, gender and gender inequality a topic of research, even under circumstances that decrease both the autonomy of social-sciences and humanities researchers and their potential for successful truth claims. There is an ongoing need to see the emergence and positioning of truth claims on gender relations and gender equality as one element of a dynamics of gender inequality in which different actors, institutions and strategies participate, and now is the time we need to understand and map the changing configurations of allies and opponents in politics, civil society, economy and academia.

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The author declares no conflict of interests.

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