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'You can't blame me for all the misery in the world': Perceived Moral Judgment Within Right and Far-Right Reddit Spaces

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**Universiteit
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**‘You can't blame me for all the misery in the world’: Perceived Moral
Judgment Within Right and Far-Right Reddit Spaces**

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MsC Cultural Anthropology and Development Sociology: Global Ethnography

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Table of Contents

Introduction	4
Method	6
Introduction	6
Conducting online research	6
r/Forum_Democratie	7
r/FreeDutch	9
Conducting Offline Research	10
Positionality	10
Approaching Interlocutors	11
Ethical considerations.	12
Theoretical Framework	14
The Rise of the Far Right	14
Race	17
Online Far-Right Communities	19
Moral Anthropology	21
Freedom, Censorship and Responsibility	23
Introduction	23
Freedom from institutional control	23
Freedom of expression	25
Responsibility	28
Conclusion	32
Morality, Blame and the Charge of Racism	33
Introduction	33
Aversion to moral authority	33
Blame	39
The charge of racism	40
Conclusion	47
Forum voor Democratie	48
Introduction	48
Forum voor Democratie on the rise	49
March 7th: FVD Café Utrecht	50
March 11th: The FVD Theater Tour Tilburg	55
Conclusion	63
Conclusion	65
Literature	67

Introduction

For the colonial powers of the recent past, the 21st century is one of reckoning. Contemporary times have featured an increasing social and political demand for accountability for the sustained damage of colonial exploitation, and the persistent reality of racism and inequality. Although public response has not been of one mind on any of these subjects, there is no denying that the collective outrage they inspire is indicative of change.

Such demands bear a heavy weight in Dutch public discussion like in many other Western nations. The Netherlands' colonial past had over the 20th century gathered dust, safe from public scrutiny. Yet, there is an increasing demand for the acknowledgment of colonialism and retribution for its impact on the lived realities of those alive today. This call for the acknowledgment of injustice, discrimination and racism and the historical and structural factors that reproduce it has come to constitute and signal a distinct political identity.

This political identity has come in tandem with another: one forming a stark contrast, openly rejecting 'wokeness' and multiculturalism and vouching for a homogenous Dutch identity. A key aspect of this call itself is the accusation that it is not allowed to exist because it diverts from the cultural norm (Prins 2002: 364). This is not a fringe phenomenon. Rather, it is a movement of considerable size. It is known by many names, but will here be referred to as the rise of the Right. In the Netherlands alone the far-right populist group Forum voor Democratie professes at the time of writing to have over sixty thousand paying members and to be the 'fastest growing freedom movement of the Netherlands' (Forum voor Democratie s.a.). This would be remarkable on its own, but is perhaps more notable because it breaks taboos tied to fundamental Dutch values of equality and tolerance.

The follower base to the rise of the Right is diverse, comprising people from different social strata, occupations, and income classes (Çankaya & Mepschen 2019: 630). It centralizes a notion that foreigners enter into the Netherlands to the detriment of 'ordinary', hard-working Dutch citizens, and that elites are apathetic towards their worries or corruptly work against them, favoring immigrants instead (Noury & Roland 2020: 423) It features a political identity excluding both the elite and foreigners, and favoring a sense of national and ethnic sameness (Noury & Roland 2020: 423). It coincides with what anthropologist Gloria Wekker (2016) refers to as Dutch racism: racism operating from under the guise of a nationwide self-image of tolerance and equality. Self-proclaimed tolerance, Wekker argues, both conceals racism and deflects any accountability or self-reflection. As similarly noted by Boukje Prins, this new movement combines the breaking of Dutch racism taboos with simultaneous celebration of its directness: on telling it like it is (2002: 370). This movement has persisted in the face of taboo and social sanctioning, and has worked its way up to a place in the political arena.

There is a puzzle here. Social norms are tied to distinct social surroundings, and adherence is a requirement for social inclusion (Mattingly 2014: 8). Dutch social spheres feature a strong social norm against racism. This could pose a strong incentive for conformity. Yet, this shared moral frame provides a context for the origin of a movement seemingly pleading against that moral frame. It openly transgresses these norms while professing to represent a Dutch national identity and claiming to be silenced and excluded.

To find an answer to these questions I conducted an ethnography of two Reddit-based communities. I grew familiar with these online social worlds and its culture and norms, and spoke to its users. I began to see that my research question itself exuded moral judgment. It demonstrated my own discursive frame, and initially obstructed my openness to insights that contradicted it. I had understood the far-right movement and its narrative to constitute a societal ill and a problem to be

solved. This moral judgment had initially shaped my approach, my questions and my interpretations. My interlocutors viewed it as indicative of a moral superiority considered typical of the left-wing. This was a source of resentment, and played a part in what I realized was a broader aversion to the political left.

The more I learned, the more the puzzle changed. Although I had at first expected interlocutors to be forward about their ideas about race and minorities, I discovered quickly that they shunned the topics. They did not see themselves as racist or discriminative. Yet, conversations were infused with snippets of attitudes and opinions betraying more complexity. It was common for my interlocutors to explain that minorities were at least partly to blame for discrimination and inequality, for failing to assimilate, and being overrepresented in the 'bad statistics'. They opposed political measures and interventions to offset inequality, such as affirmative action.

This study combines findings from an ethnography of two popular Dutch subreddits for discussing politics, Zoom, in-person and chat-based interviews, and observations of political rallies. It relates to the larger field of study of cultural conflict and right-wing extremism, by exposing how the way in which we approach and regard the radical right might in fact have the unwanted side effects of both blinding us to our shared humanity, precluding any possibility for engaging in productive discussions, and may have dangerous implications for democracy as a whole. Ultimately, it ventures to answer the question "what are the moral logics of far-right partisans and how are they used by the far-right populist party Forum voor Democratie?" to be answered in three conceptual steps, each discussed in a subsequent empirical chapter.

The following chapter will discuss the methodological approaches for this study, along with the theoretical framework it builds on. The subsequent chapter poses the first empirical step, focusing on my interlocutors' moral narratives and how they positioned themselves inside. The subsequent chapter discusses the charge of racism and how my interlocutors conceptualized, defended and explained it in light of their feelings of being morally judged. It thereby explores how these moral narratives make space for racism to be justified and maintained, and simultaneously condemned. The third and final step explores how the recently emerged Dutch far-right populist party Forum voor Democratie has capitalized on these logical elements by subsuming them under a narrative that epistemologically and emotionally discredits and distances outside parties by painting them as corrupt and ill-intentioned, facilitates social and political polarization and ultimately delegitimizes democracy as a whole. The final chapter will discuss the conclusions to draw from these findings.

Method

Introduction

When I began my fieldwork in January of 2022, I was forced to adapt to the limitations posed by the governmental restrictions for preventing the spread of the Coronavirus. That meant that in-person fieldwork was a challenge. The Netherlands were still in a partial lockdown, and organizing events or group activities was not allowed. This precluded my earlier plans to conduct an ethnography of a far-right group by attending get-togethers, hosting interviews and group discussions. However, during this time the world of online communities was lively, posing unique research opportunities.

I combined a two-month long ethnography of the subreddits /Forum_Democratie and /FreeDutch, with semi-structured Zoom- and in-person interviews, and unstructured Reddit chat-based and in-person interviews, and with an analysis of observations and conversations during two in-person Forum voor Democratie rallies part of FVD's 2022 municipal elections campaign. Over the following sections, I will delve deeper into my research approaches and my personal positionality and ethical considerations as a researcher of morality. I will combine this with a short description of my interlocutors. Finally, I will discuss the theoretical work forming the basis of this study.

Conducting online research

I partly decided to conduct ethnography online due to necessity, and partly due to its unique affordances. The internet is not a space separate from the 'real world'. Rather the offline and online are intertwined, together and separate at once. Virtual social worlds are similarly complex as offline social worlds, constituting their own cultures (Winter & Lavis 2020: 55). I was able to study how people behaved in settings with specific behavioral codes, under conditions of anonymity. Observing online communities goes beyond simply reading text: people are able to express themselves in a myriad of ways, for instance using emojis, jokes or memes, or through up- or downvoting (Winter & Lavis 2020: 56). Behavior may entail responding to someone directly or indirectly, or punishing or rewarding someone by defending or attacking them. One way of capturing these nuances, (Winter & Lavis 2020 58) posit, is through actively taking note of them. They refer to this as 'active listening' in an online context: critical is to not remove the text from its context, and to try to understand its emotional subtext (Winter & Lavis 2020: 58).

Reddit is a "social networking site, a social news site, and a message board" (Brown *et al.* 2018: 5) hosting a sprawling web of topic-centered subfora. It is a digital manifestation of a veritable social world, featuring group dynamics, customs and social norms, influenced by Reddit-specific aesthetics. Upon creating an account, Reddit only requires a username. This enables a degree of anonymity unique to social media sites (Brown *et al.* 2018: 2). Users are able to join subfora, or subreddits, geared to specific topics. Here they can post news items, images, questions or links, for others to comment on, forming discussion threads. Reddit facilitates, in essence, the forming of topic-based online communities (Gaudette *et al.* 2021: 3493). As a research site it proved to be both accessible and data-rich.

The Reddit company has a vocal commitment to free speech, and is hesitant to control or regulate content (Brown *et al.* 2018: 2). Most regulation befalls Subreddit moderators and the upvoting system. Moderators have the power to delete comments, or 'ban' users entirely from using a Subreddit. Each Subreddit has its own rules of conduct. The upvoting system enables users to upvote or downvote comments, which subsequently influences the total amount of 'Karma points' of a user. This enables subreddit communities to build their own collective identity (Gaudette *et al.* 2021: 3494). If a comment score falls too far into the negative digits, it will become hidden at the bottom of a

thread. For users with an excessively low or negative Karma point score, new posts or comments have to be approved by a moderator before being posted to a Subreddit.

Upon hearing about my desire to conduct an ethnography of morality of the far-right, a friend pointed me to the two Subreddits /FreeDutch and /Forum_Democratie. He said that they were ‘quite right-wing’. They were incredibly interesting research sites, both because they afforded an insight into the kinds of conversations and interactions users tend to have in such digital spaces, as well as the noticeable ways in which these Subreddits constituted social worlds distinct from one another. Both Subreddits held a reputation for welcoming right-wing political views.

Although Reddit has a reputation for hosting content deemed too unacceptable for other social media platforms (Brown *et al.* 2018: 2), my interlocutors frequently voiced feeling like they were subject to excessive regulation. They viewed Reddit as a primarily left-wing hub in which right-wing users were disproportionately banned from Subreddits, or ‘brigaded’, collectively downvoted by dissenting users (Graham & Rodriguez 2021: 4). Users frequently pointed to Reddit’s upvoting system as facilitating this, as it enabled the comments that most people disagreed with to be effectively hidden from view. This feature, combined with the hyperpolarized setting of a political Reddit page, pose ideal circumstances for collective downvoting between groups. When I discussed this with my interlocutors, they often blamed the typically left-wing intolerance of divergent opinions. During an interview, a left-leaning user acknowledged the disproportionate banning and downvoting of right-wing users and comments. He attributed this to the rude and wording and coarse content to these comments.

I was able to observe users’ behaviors and use them as conversational prompts. Initially my approach was mainly passive: I read along with threads and formed opinions, but only truly participated through upvoting or downvoting comments. All the while, I was learning about the subreddit norms and code of conduct: stick to the subreddit rules, be funny when you can, always be prepared to be attacked. I took baby steps toward a more active participation, posting a comment and a reply here and there, and anxiously watching my Karma score going up and down as people up- and downvoted it.


I initially aspired to supply my ethnographic data with Zoom interviews, thinking that audio and video would lend additional depth and dimensions to my data. I conducted two semi-structured Zoom interviews and one in-person interview, made recordings and transcribed them. I realized it was difficult to convince people to talk to me via Zoom. Some people stopped replying as soon as I mentioned Zoom. For some people, it was notably distressing to be asked in the first place. I finally decided to conduct interviews using the Reddit chat function instead, conducting four more interviews. Initially it felt like an impairment, as interviewees sometimes took days to answer, or sometimes stopped answering altogether. I decided to go from my previous semi-structured interviews, to an unstructured interview approach that allowed interviewees to talk about what they wanted, and here and there ask my own questions. Then, I realized that interviewees were willing to supply more vulnerable and personal information shrouded in the anonymity of the chat-function.

r/Forum_Democratie

Forum_Democratie is a subreddit for discussing all things concerning Forum voor Democratie. It is specifically geared to FVD ‘fans’. On April 12th of 2022, it hosted 13004 members.

The posts range from links to news items on FVD, to news on issues on which the party has taken a stance, toward open questions posted by users. Notably, the posts often focus on conspiracy theories.


About Community ...



r/Forum_Democratie

Forum_Democratie is de onofficiële fan-made subreddit voor FvD-fans. Hier kunt u alles van meems tot artikelen of discussies gerelateerd aan FvD plaatsen. De subreddit is niet aan FvD zelf gelieerd. Zie de website <https://forumvoordemocratie.nl/> voor informatie over de partij.

13.0k FvD'ers **18** FvD'ers online

 Created Dec 16, 2017

r/Forum_Democratie Rules

1. Houd u aan de Reddit site-wide regels ▼

2. Noem geen NL gebruikers of subreddits bij naam ▼

3. Plaats geen materiaal dat FvD in een kwaad daglicht kan stellen ▼

4. Gedraag u te allen tijde netjes richting anderen ▼

5. Plaats a.u.b. niet een al geplaatste link ▼

6. Geef uw post a.u.b. een flair ▼

7. Plaats geen low effort content, shitposts, vraagtopics, memes, of comments ▼

8. Plaats a.u.b. FvD gerelateerde inhoud ▼

9. Neem a.u.b. de originele titel van een artikel over of vat de inhoud zelf bondig samen. ▼

Figure 1. The community description for r/Forum_Democratie alongside its community rules.

The news items and the discussion threads illustrate a clear collective identity. However, it is fragmented. Users often self-categorize into opposing groups. For instance, conspiracy-believers and conspiracy-skeptics, or those who have faith in the future of FVD, and those who do not. The comments often voice feelings of moroseness, anxiety and displeasure geared at the current circumstances of the world and the imagined future, as well as the political climate and the Dutch public. They often mention ‘us’ and ‘our people’, conveying feelings of alienation and exclusion, and opposition to common enemies: usually the political Left, the media, and those in Dutch society stuck in a false reality.

I often came across the sentiment that the political right is targeted by political adversaries even within their own spaces. A poll confirmed that this was more than a mere gut feeling. In February of 2022, u/DNEKEBNO posted a poll onto r/Forum_Democratie measuring users’ stances on the recently erupted war between Russia and Ukraine, and with an options of (dis)agreement for both ‘FVD voters’ and ‘non-FVD voters’. The results suggested that out of the 3000 respondents to the poll, only 11,1 percent were FVD voters.

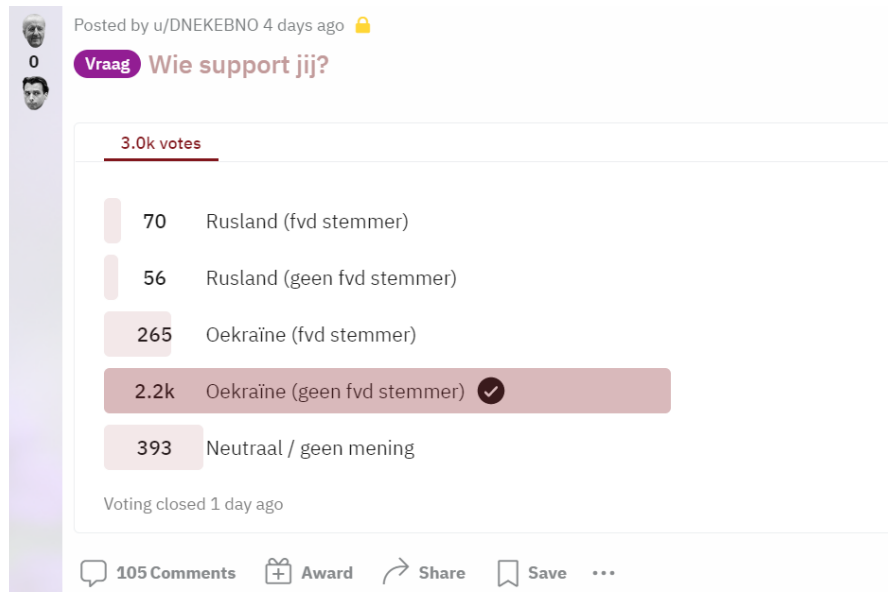


Figure 2. A poll originally posted by u/DNEKEBNO on r/Forum_Democratie in February of 2022. It measures users' stances on the Ukraine-Russia conflict. Out of over 3000 votes, only 345 respondents reported voting for FVD. This excludes the 393 users voting for the fifth option reporting a neutral stance, which did not specify FVD partisanship. I myself voted in support for Ukraine as a non-FVD voter.

A comment pinned to the top said the thread had been 'locked' for further replies. According to a moderator this was due to “death threats and the sheer number of left-wing trolls in general” (Shekel_In_Gaza_Strip 2022). One person says the following:

It's ridiculous that we've been enforcing Rule 2 since day 1 to make sure we don't bother anyone and not even mention Dutch subreddits to make brigading of our subreddit impossible. While very powerful Dutch subreddits with supermods violate this rule weekly and are constantly trolling and brigading here. It is now rare to find a post or comment with a positive number of upvotes. Reddit admins should do something about this.

Although the majority of comments posted onto Discussion threads are posted by apparent FVD supporters, comment scores are rarely above zero. It gave the impression that some dissenting users opt to stay in the shadows and downvote comments without entering into discussions themselves.

r/FreeDutch

/FreeDutch is a subreddit for posting news articles relevant to Dutch society and politics. On April 12 of 2022, it hosted 8727 members. It is especially geared towards open discussion and open expression of opinions. Posts are generally links to articles from Dutch newspapers. The articles feature a wide array of sociocultural topics like governmental Corona measures, housing shortages and the royal family. Sometimes these are mild discussions, sometimes strong disagreements. People respond in a wide array of styles. Sometimes they made jokes. Sometimes they relate the subject matter to other concerns and ideas about the world and where it is headed, which fuels agreement and disagreement and a more heated discussion regardless. Sometimes, comments are outrightly offensive. The majority of comments were civil and the esteemed high regard for the free expression of opinions

seems to be upheld. The topics that feature more vehement discussion in the political arena are similarly the ones that feature more emotional and uncivil discussion in the subreddit.

Whereas r/Forum_Democratie featured a distinct collective identity, r/FreeDutch featured an arena for discussion and disagreement. This setting provided a very different view into how these circumstances translate into group identities and group dynamics.

The image shows two side-by-side panels from the r/FreeDutch subreddit. The left panel, titled 'About Community', contains a description of the subreddit's purpose: 'Vrijheid van meningsuiting is op deze subreddit gewaarborgd! --- Nederlandstalige subreddit waarin iedereen welkom is om nieuws, ideeën en meningen met elkaar te delen. Aangemaakt als reactie op de grootste Nederlandstalige subreddit waarin de vrijheid van meningsuiting beperkt wordt.' It also displays '9.7k Members' and '182 Online' users, and a creation date of 'Created Dec 17, 2017'. The right panel, titled 'r/FreeDutch Rules', lists seven rules: 1. Plaats niet te veel draden, 2. Wees netjes, 3. Wees on topic, 4. Alleen toegestane content, 5. De titel van de draad moet identiek zijn aan die van de bron. Toegestane bronnen zijn nieuwssites, 6. Wees volledig, and 7. Respecteer de mods.

Figure 3. The community description for r/FreeDutch alongside its community rules.

Conducting Offline Research

I was lucky time-wise, and was able to attend two campaign rallies for Forum voor Democratie in two different settings. One of these meetings was mainly intended to be a get-together for FVD-voters to meet and have a beer together. The other was more official, and functioned as a rallying meeting, to convey the party's goals and image. At both meetings, I listened to the politicians' speeches and made notes on my phone. I made sound recordings which I later analyzed. I also spoke to people, and learned what attracted them to the party.

Positionality

I used a Reddit profile that I made a year ago but never actively used. It was a profile with a generalized screenname - u/Infinite-Squirrel423. As I went about my ethnography, Reddit kept shooting me notifications, spurring me on to make a personalized icon. I debated doing so, but felt that it might be more neutral and professional to keep my icon the default. If I went about personalizing it, I felt it might either give things away about me that wouldn't benefit my research by giving away the image I 'wanted to project', or be a source of bias on the ground of my gender, hair color or other customization that would give away more than I deemed beneficial. As there are quite a number of other users who also use their default picture, I didn't think it would really shape the way people perceive me to the extent that it was a hindrance.

I only realized two months into my ethnography, after an encounter with a user who was very suspicious as to my intentions, that perhaps my combination of a randomized name and default picture came across as shady. It also probably didn't help that people are able to see other users' contributions when going to their profile, and my own number of contributions was quite limited. So, in that sense my effort to not mask my unfamiliarity with the platform might have made me appear somewhat bot-like, or untrustworthy to someone distrustful of others or establishments.

I quickly learned that I would never be a neutral observer or participant. As an upper-middle class, left-wing, female university student, I was automatically an opponent to any potential research participant I approached. This was something that I struggled with constantly. I encountered it when reading through discussion threads and noticing I was inclined to agree with people as soon as they made clear they were left-wing. I noticed from the way the terms I used in my own comments and interview questions betrayed my reasoning, and as such my political identity. I noticed when I encountered stereotypes about ingenuine, morally superior leftists and felt personally affronted. It necessitated continuous reflection on my personal and social identity. In the subreddits, Collective political identities were evoked almost constantly and intergroup animosity was frequent. Just a handful of names I saw my own group of political leftists being referred to, were 'idiots', 'Thierry haters', 'indoctrinated little kids', 'NOS muppets', 'Groenlinks jugend', 'democrat clown', 'leftist incest gang'. This hyperpolarization even necessitated me to avoid using politicized terms that might become cues for my political identity and shut my interlocutors off.

Over the course of my research, I realized this perceived moral superiority was perhaps not so strange. That perhaps, it was demonstrated by my very research question, methods and all the assumptions and information that shaped it. That, maybe, this moral judgment was not simply a passive point of awareness or irritation for my research group. Maybe it played a central part in the very dynamics I was investigating.

Aside from my Reddit-scrolling endeavors, I was confronted with my group identity as I conducted interviews. I continuously had to remind myself to remain open-minded and self-critical, even as I spoke to people I knew I disagreed with, and even as they voiced opinions about 'leftists' that fell well into offensive territory. Often, I was only able to take a step back once I had transcribed my interviews, and could judge what was said from a greater distance.

Approaching Interlocutors

Sometimes comments or users caught my attention throughout observation, upon which I made note of their username. When I approached my interviewees, I always sent them a personal message via chat, telling them who I was, what I was studying (I usually said that I had heard the left-wing story of what the right-wing stood for, and now I wanted to hear their own), and how I came upon their name, always enclosing a link to the comment in question. I found eight interlocutors willing to be interviewed. I ended up conducting two Zoom-based interviews with people I approached this way, one in-person interview with a politically active person I know and who was willing to talk to me, and five more chat-based interviews, one of which I later chose to omit.

My interlocutors had many ideas about their political convictions and what set them apart from others'. They each had niche topics of interest, and had their reasons for venturing to Reddit. Most of them simply liked to argue. They were informed about the goings-on in Dutch society and Dutch politics - much more than I myself was. Often, understanding their comments and arguments necessitated me to go into (sometimes hours-long) Google explorations. To them, staying informed was a hobby and an interest, and sometimes a passion. It was not the same for me. My understanding of the many political happenings they referenced always stayed surface-level. I was more interested in the feelings, beliefs and ideas steering their interests.

This was an asset in some ways. I went into conversations quite blankly, and interlocutors were open (and eager) to explain things. Their interest, knowledge and willingness to engage with others and convince them proved an incentive. I almost always opened with some variation of the question ‘what does being left- or right-wing mean to you?’ to which my interviewees most often said that they felt this implied right-left dichotomy to be misleading and insufficient for capturing the differences it is meant to denote. However, this was always a stepping-stone for my participants to then explain what those differences were.

All interlocutors were politically right-wing except one. I call them right-wing because they themselves did. They were aware of the shortcomings of the term, and sometimes said that they did not fully feel like they were right-wing partisans. However, partially because the subreddits so clearly distinguished between the left- and right-wing, these political identities were nonetheless easily understood and people had a general view of what they themselves most identified with. What set them apart as a group, was a shared feeling that their political convictions were not accepted within mainstream Dutch society. Four out of my seven interviewees were male. One was female. Two did not specify their gender.

Ethical considerations.

A complicating factor was that I was studying people who I strongly disagreed with, and who disagreed with me too. Furthermore, my interlocutors were much more familiar with the dangers of the internet than I was. This meant that I was essentially required to protect my interlocutors from dangers I did not know. This led to the occasional ethical juggle. I at first had a Google document specifying information about my study for earning informed consent. One interviewee however worried that I could see their email address upon opening it. Although it later turned out that I could not, this interviewee was quite distressed. The user initially agreed to be interviewed by me anyway, but made apparent that they remained suspicious. At some point, they asked to see proof that I was really a university student. I finally decided to tell them again that they were free to stop responding at any time, and I would not approach them again. They stopped, and I decided to omit their interview data entirely.

There were additional complications when I came across a ‘weekly discussion thread’ on r/FreeDutch where my research was openly discussed. The user in question had posted a comment, asking whether others had spoken to me and whether I was legit. It was a startling and humbling experience. Another interviewee, u/MadeyesNL ended up defending me in the thread, saying that I had talked to him on Zoom and was legit- that I had even declined telling him who else he had spoken to. In the end, the two users were caught in an unpleasant back-and-forth.

It was quite an awkward experience that I decided to learn from. I did away with the informed consent form entirely, opting to share instead my Leiden University email address and name, and relevant information for informed consent in the initial chat messages establishing contact. I also refrained from asking other users to talk on other platforms than Reddit chat itself.

Someone in the comment thread suggested in the comments to approach the moderators. I had not realized previously that perhaps, a moderator could be comparable to a gatekeeper, and that perhaps it was part of ‘reddiquette’ to have done so. When I approached a r/FreeDutch moderator, however, they explained that contacting a moderator was not necessary.

Another practical ethical dilemma occurred when I signed up to attend two political FVD rallies. I had found the events in the agenda on the Forum voor Democratie website. The events were intended for ‘anyone who was interested’, regardless whether they were members. However, they were not exactly public, either: they required a paid ticket, and were in indoor locations. Upon discussion with Anouk, my supervisor, I sent the organizers an email explaining that I was a student

conducting research, and did not intend to put anyone in a bad light. I included my email address, should they be opposed to my attending. I never received a reply.

Finally, my taking a moral anthropological approach necessitated continuous critical reflection. For me, that meant a conscious commitment to keep track of a long, winding analysis document in which I continuously reflected upon my positionality.

Theoretical Framework

The Rise of the Far Right

The academic sphere lacks a uniform, agreed-upon term for the 'far right'. However, there is a consensus that the term 'right wing' is not just a vast simplification, but also misleading: the right-left spectrum is much more multi-dimensional than this manner of conceptualization would suggest (Holmes 2000: 13). Lumping the phenomenon under either 'populism' or 'nationalism' would conceal distinct features of each ideology (Halikiopoulou & Vlandas 2019: 5). In this study, I will refer to this ideology as 'far right'. This choice will be motivated over the next sections.

Firstly, populism and nationalism are two different phenomena with distinct implications for the political climate. Although there is again no consensus on the exact meaning of populism, it is generally taken to encapsulate political ideas surrounding the protection of 'the people' and their traditions against 'the elite' and, especially in recent years, 'privileged minority groups' (Brubaker 2017: 373). Nationalist rhetoric focuses more specifically on nationality-based group conflict, vouching for protecting the identity and sovereignty of a national in-group, from 'foreign' out-groups (Halikiopoulou & Vlandas 2019: 5). Many political parties today combine both ideologies, leading some scholars to choose to use the term 'right-wing populism' as an analytical term. However, not every party is necessarily populist and analytically lumping them together disguises meaningful differences (Halikiopoulou & Vlandas 2019: 3). The use of 'far right' as an analytical label is deemed more suitable because it leaves room for conceptual distinction between populist and nationalist parties, while also accounting for their similar preoccupation with nationalist solutions to a range of social issues. This enables both the acknowledgement of (historical, ideological, rhetorical) differences between parties that follow these rhetorics, and the fundamental similarities which unite them (Halikiopoulou & Vlandas 2019: 3; Halikiopoulou & Vlandas 2019: 6).

Thus, the far right constitutes parties with a common tendency to call for nationalist solutions to a wide range of societal issues (Halikiopoulou & Vlandas 2019: 7). Far-right parties' rhetoric tends to center around two things. Firstly, social exclusion of outgroups is framed as a matter of values, which are presented as incompatible with those of democratic, liberal, Western-European countries as well as threatening to national security and social cohesion. Examples of terrorism, female oppression and homophobia are invoked to support their case. Secondly, such parties often call for more redistributive welfare policies, which supports their narrative position as 'for the people' (Halikiopoulou & Vlandas 2019: 13).

The rise of the far right denotes a social phenomenon which began in the twentieth century and has since gained momentum (Gingrich & Banks 2006: 4). This stir is felt strongly in Western-European societies, and emerges at this particular historical junction for a reason. After the Second World War, the European Union was formed to facilitate cooperation and shared accountability among fifty European states (Holmes 2000: 26). Central to this decision, which notably impaired national sovereignty, was a strong moral imperative to prevent the horrors of the Second World War from taking place ever again. Part of this commitment was a disavowal of the term *race* and its connotations. Although the Holocaust is acknowledged and revered within European sensemaking as a product of Europe, the European colonial history is decidedly not (Goldberg 2006: 336). Goldberg remarks that however insufficiently acknowledged, colonialism was a cornerstone in the *making* of Europe and its nation-states and racial categorizations were built into its social structures. Race, he writes, is not just a word. It is a way of thinking. It is a lived experience. Even though it was made into a notion both unacceptable and unspeakable, it continued to define the sensemaking and existence of Europeans: "buried. But buried alive" (Goldberg 2006: 338). The

European disavowal of the notion of race in the wake of the Second World War in effect dismissed and concealed European colonial history, as well as its many effects persisting today.

In the 1980s and 1990s, Holmes writes, the European parliament conducted research into the emergence of a 'new racism' in European public and political spheres (2000: 35). Reasons for these concerns were the quick gaining of ground by nationalist parties like that of the French politician Marie Le Pen. The reports chronicled the 'rise of the right', strongly critical of its racist, xenophobic tendencies. Holmes emphasizes the importance of framing in how political parties are able to shape the political arena. Choices made by the European parliament in framing this issue, he writes, meant that the far right was conceptualized as echoing fascist, racist ideologies of the Second World War - a history which still instills horror in European citizens and nations alike. This resulted in the silencing of 'intolerant' and 'bigoted' right-wing voices becoming a prominent mode for attaining an ideal of a harmonious, ethno-culturally diverse Europe.

This choice, Holmes writes, significantly constrained the European Union's mandates for cultural diversity and European pluralism (2000: 35). By morally connecting this debate to the racism and fascism of the Second World War, those in fact served to shape the terms of debate. Essentially, according to Holmes, this prevented ethno-cultural diversity from becoming an item of political significance in and of itself. It shifted the debate away from cultural diversity itself and towards questions of whether European histories of fascism and racism were being repeated. According to Holmes, political conditions were created wherein right-wing politicians became able to define the terms of debate on ethno-cultural diversity. Furthermore, and perhaps even more insidious, Holmes notes that politicians were then able to create a "discursive field within which "racism" is increasingly difficult to define, confront, or oppose" and the idea of a multicultural, multiracial Europe became more and more foreign (Holmes 2000: 64).

The tactical move to profile societal issues in certain politically beneficial frameworks, is itself not unique to far right parties. In a podcast from the Dutch, left-wing journalism platform *de Correspondent*, political scientist Tom van der Meer (2021) explains that this tactic is shared by parties across the political spectrum. The political arena in the Netherlands comprises a wide array of parties with varying stances on issues like multiculturalism, the European union, economics, and, notably, ethics (Hakhverdian 2021). Parties have a 'niche' framework which resonates well with their constituencies (Meer 2021). If a new issue is put onto the political agenda, it pays to decide the terms of debate: it puts the party in the forefront of the public eye and gives it the power to frame its solutions and steer political discussion. For Dutch far-right parties such as *Forum For Democratie*, Forum for Democracy (FVD), and *Partij voor de Vrijheid*, Party for Freedom (PVV), this niche comes down to nationalism. FVD frontman Thierry Baudet (2021) himself acknowledged the tactical benefit of venturing outside socially and normally acceptable frames. He spoke of 'commotion' as a conscious tactic, allowing the transgression of limits of social and normative acceptability, and altering the playing field. For Baudet, moral frameworks are constricting limitations imposed by 'opponents', or by the elite: why, he argues, should 'they' get to decide moral boundaries? He speaks of evoking moral outrage, which is painted as proof that he was right all along, and that a taboo or moral boundary has been 'unmasked' for what it is: a mere mechanism for keeping the established order in place (Baudet 2021). I would learn later that this fits neatly into a narrative cementing what he paints as a fundamental divide between those who follow Baudet's ideology, and 'the rest' of Dutch society.

People prefer these types of rhetorics for a range of reasons. Holmes, who conducted ethnographic fieldwork in the Italian region of Friulani, narrows the far right paradigm down to "a cultural framework of solidarity", which partisans look toward in the face of various concerns about their identity and forms of alienation which they experience as a result of capitalism and globalization (Holmes 2000: 3). He explained this mode of cultural logic as a way to cope with feelings of 'cultural

estrangement', and a sense of not belonging in a fast-capitalist world (2000: 89). According to Holmes, a shared adherence to this ideology consolidated a sense of unity among community members. He found that integralist sentiments, for community members, had different functions: "as a framework of meaning, as a practice of everyday life, as an idiom of solidarity, and, above all, as a consciousness of belonging linked to a specific cultural milieu" (Holmes 2000: 3). According to Holmes, this cultural logic can exist quietly without being politicized, but may under certain conditions become ground for passionate political action. Holmes highlights especially a sense of 'not belonging' in one's community as a key condition that spurs this. This condition, according to Holmes, is a distinctive feature of fast-capitalist society, to which integralism is a response. If politicized, integralism centers devotion to cultural traditions, which is tied to a "distinctive historical critique", and an "exclusionary political economy" (Holmes 2000: 4). This conceptualization does something decidedly interesting: namely, it puts nationalist dynamics in a frame of a quest for personal and communal identity and belongingness. It becomes possible to analyze and understand dynamics of exclusion on a more deeply human level, as entrenched in deeply human needs and wants.

Belongingness and exclusion are a recurrent finding in much ethnographic work on the far right. Gingrich and Banks (2006) note unfulfilled belongingness and kinship needs due to individualism and urbanization of today's capitalist world as factors which drive preference for far right rhetoric. Similarly, Shoshan's 2016 study of German nationalist youths related far right partisanship to shifts in class-belonging and socioeconomic anxieties. Cramer's 2016 study of Wisconsin ruralites found that preference for exclusionary, right-wing politics manifested in a political partisanship style strongly guided by group identification and outgroup resentment, which was strengthened by feelings of distributive injustice and being overlooked by those in power. Ginrich and Banks (2006: 6) explain far-right partisanship by way of the forced reconciliation with the colonial past, paired with post-war migration streams and a rearranging world order wherein one's own society is no longer hierarchically on top. Tiryakian (1995) rather pointed to the collective effervescence experienced by those within a societal movement with a charismatic leader.

Nikki Sterkenburg (2021), who conducted a study into the 'new' Dutch far-right movement, found that she recurrently came across five 'types' of far-right activists who had joined this movement searching for largely the same things. Firstly, *rechtvaardigheidszoekers*, justice seekers, who see themselves as hardworking citizens who are abandoned by the government in favor of immigrants, and socially and politically powerless to do anything about it (Sterkenburg 2021: 40; Sterkenburg 2021: 60). Then *politieke zoekers*, political seekers, more socio-economically successful and familiar with the political landscape - they hold clear ideas about the changes that need to be made, and look for support from Dutch society, assuming that most citizens feel the same (Sterkenburg 2021: 60). Furthermore, she typified *spanningzoekers*, excitement seekers, who join far-right groups to provoke and rebel, and pair this with a social consciousness and perception of their group and culture being under threat (Sterkenburg 2021: 112). Then, *sociale zoekers*, social seekers, for whom activism was primarily social. Their driving factor was the social relationships with other activists, rather than the ideology itself (Sterkenburg 2021: 123). Finally, *ideologische zoekers*, ideological seekers. This group was distinct in combining a belief in white superiority with a conviction that they themselves formed a supreme group within white civilization. They engaged in what she called self-purification: self-improvement through reading, exercising and eating healthy foods. They usually became involved in extreme-right activism after spending time on the internet familiarizing themselves with theories such as 'the great replacement theory', holding that the 'authentic' Dutch population will become a minority in their own country due to falling birth rates, marriages between people of different races, and migration (Sterkenburg 2021: 82). They also held strong opinions about political correctness and 'cultural marxism', which both tie into the notion that white people are the sole group

not allowed to be proud of themselves, but made to feel guilty for their histories of oppression. They combined this ethnic identity strengthened by the perception of their group being under threat, with the conviction that they themselves are not racist (Sterkenburg 2021: 83). The majority of my research took place online, so it is perhaps no surprise that my own research group showed many similarities with the ideological seekers Sterkenburg described. What this means will be discussed over the next section.

What these studies suggest is that we should be careful about simplifying the far right movement into a neat narrative of cause and effect. What becomes clear is that political partisanship is driven by a kaleidoscope of interrelated factors. The notion that a homogenous national identity can ever exist - Dutch or otherwise - is flawed at best (Gupta & Ferguson 2012: 375). Yet, these debates are not about factual information: largely, they are concerns of identity, emotion and belonging. They are produced by the need to understand the world and feel like one has a place in it. Attempting to do away with far right sentiments through silencing or social sanctioning does little to solve underlying issues and may even cement societal divides (Holmes 2000: 12). This presents both a complex puzzle and an opportunity for understanding and de- and reframing the problem at hand.

Race

Firstly, we must note that the conceptual origins of race lie within European history (Mahmud 1999: 1220). Conceptualizations of racial difference were crucial for colonial rule, as assumptions of racial hierarchy were necessary for justifying white, imperial domination of other peoples (Mahmud 1999: 1220). Colonial histories shaped Europe, and subsequently the contextual origins for European science, anthropology and literature - mechanisms to make sense of the world. Scientific racism saw itself legitimized, and racial difference became inscribed in its political and social structures (Mahmud 1999: 1222; Goldberg 2000: 332).

The social-scientific discipline has moved past conceptual debates to an established understanding of race as a social category, a way of living and being entrenched in people's meaning-making, and subject to history and change (Goldberg 2006: 334). Race itself is constructed, but becomes real both in its experience and consequences through the reality of racism (Visweswaran 1998: 78). There is an important element of rhetoric and historical context to it. It is a historically contingent social reality (Mullings 2005: 670). Racism paints perceived differences as unchangeable, and works through mechanisms of subordination and exclusion to produce inequalities (Mullings 2005: 684). Racist rhetoric is rationalized through ideas about biology and culture, and tied to different kinds of inequality (class-, gender-, nationality-, and sexuality-based) (Mullings 2005: 684). Thus, racial sensemaking is situated within social systems that produce and uphold social categorizations and are subject to change over time. In this study, race will thus be understood as a socially constructed, lived reality, subject to change according to (temporal and cultural) narratives. Racism will subsequently denote the usage of these categorizations to divide people into hierarchical groups based on imagined characteristics, and into 'those that belong' and 'those that do not' in ways that produce and reproduce unequal treatment.

Harrison (2000: 49) writes that a new form of racism, preoccupied with denial and censorship, emerged in the second half of the twentieth century. This was a notable development: in the wake of the delegitimization of race as a biological construct, racism now manifested as "an undercurrent within complex intersections of culture, class, gender, and nation" (Harrison 2000: 49). This new configuration of racism was accompanied by assertions that racism may exist, but "not in our country". Although Harrison focused on Brazil as a contextual example, anthropologists have in recent years chronicled this form of racism as similarly distinctive of Western European and Dutch society.

According to Goldberg (2006: 335) the murder of Theo van Gogh was a catalyst that brought existing societal tensions surrounding Dutch national identity, immigration and assimilation to a boil. Previously unspoken concerns about race came to the forefront. He argues this was a prime example of what happens when race, a construct with historical, symbolic and social meaning, becomes an experience which cannot be named.

Wekker describes the Dutch self-image as one of 'white innocence': of tolerance, egalitarianism and progressiveness (2016: 18). Wekker argues that this obscures unaddressed racism ever present in Dutch society. She argues that Dutch 'tolerance' has prompted a dynamic wherein people from marginalized groups experience racism and simultaneously cannot address it because the dominant idea is that it does not exist (Wekker 2016: 15). The *topic* of race and racism is itself taboo. Tolerance and inclusivity are celebrated, but viewed as societal characteristics, goals that have been achieved, rather than a purpose to strive toward and critically reflect upon along the way (Wekker 2016: 113).

Çankaya and Mepschen (2019: 629) similarly observe that racism, if acknowledged within the Dutch public sphere, tends to be projected onto the iconic 'white working class' instead of prompting true critical discussion. Racism is construed by the 'morally enlightened' middle class as a symptom of 'moral failing', and serves as a vehicle for creating social distance between themselves and the working class of Dutch society, while simultaneously doing little to address racism as a broader social issue. This, Çankaya and Mepschen write, upholds racism as well as the Dutch narrative of innocence (2019: 629). According to Wekker such narratives of innocence don't just conceal Dutch racism, but are one of its core elements. If Dutch racism is confronted, responses tend to involve vehement denial, coupled with outrage at the insinuation. It is a force preventing true discussion or change (Wekker 2016: 15).

A vivid demonstration of this is the societal revolt that occurred when in 2012 international criticism regarding *Zwarte Piet*, Black Pete, gained traction. Black Pete is a blackface-wearing figure part of the Dutch children's celebration of Sinterklaas. Findings from Hilhorst and Hermes' 2016 social media study into proponents of preserving Black Pete, suggested that proponents of keeping the figure of Black Pete the way he was strongly denied that the figure was racist (2016: 227). They responded with assertions of victimhood on the part of the 'native Dutch' and simultaneous dismissal of the hardship of people of color (Hilhorst & Hermes 2016: 228). Responses featured denial and deflection, and a strong insistence that Sinterklaas is a 'children's celebration'. Notable about this narrative is again the invocation of an image of innocence. Other prominently featured sentiments revolved around a presumed 'ungratefulness' on the part of minority communities and a glorification of an inability to recognize racism. According to them, this inability was framed as a "mark of purity" due to its presupposed inability to see color (Hilhorst & Hermes 2016: 223-229). According to Hilhorst and Hermes, the core of this narrative was a pain caused by a perceived loss of Dutch "power, influence and authenticity" due to globalization and multiculturalism (2016: 230). They argue, however, that this discourse is both misguided and incomplete: that it is a "fantasy" which is stripped of historical contextualization and nuance, and denies people their full humanity (Hilhorst & Hermes 2016: 230).

It appears that the conceptualization of race and racism within Dutch society is informed by an intricate web of epistemological and ontological logics. Logics which relate to self image, belonging, beliefs about oneself and one's place in the world, in-group and outgroup conflict, and ontological differences.

Online Far-Right Communities

Research has for years attempted to understand what drives people to extremist political groups. Recent scholarly research has increasingly studied the role of the internet in the spread of far-right ideas. Accumulating evidence indeed points to such a role. However, it is not yet fully understood and one should be wary of simplifying it or mistaking it for one of causality (Marwick *et al.* 2022: 7). For instance, although the internet has made white supremacist content easily accessible, mere exposure does not automatically mean adoption, and it is as of yet unclear whether social media molds extremist political ideas, or whether those holding extremist political ideas are more likely to seek out extremist content and groups (Marwick *et al.* 2022: 29). Rather, evidence suggests that there are emotional, political and economic complexities at play, and that the role of the internet is multifold (Marwick *et al.* 2022: 7). Three affordances of social media were specifically related to an increasing far-right shift in users: “recommendation algorithms, online communities and partisan ‘echo chambers’” (Marwick *et al.* 2022: 30).

Youtube’s recommendation algorithm has been demonstrated to recommend its users increasingly extreme content. For instance, politically interested users might quickly be recommended videos on conspiracy theories (Marwick *et al.* 2022: 30). Some research has pointed to a process of gradual conversion, through letting users get used to extremist ideas (normalization), shifting their baseline for what is acceptable (acclimation), and finally allowing users to see groups of people as ‘other’, as distinct outgroups (dehumanization) (Munn in Marwick *et al.* 2022).

The internet enables the formation of like-minded communities. Such communities perform distinct social functions, such as friendship and kinship, outgroup resentment and creation of and adherence to shared social norms (Marwick *et al.* 2022: 25). Like offline communities, online communities can produce a sense of belongingness and togetherness, even without physical proximity (Bliuc *et al.* 2020: 2). In such groups, within-group influence and validation occur by way of mutual interaction. Values and attitudes are continuously exchanged and attuned to, even more so than in offline groups (Bliuc *et al.* 2020: 2). For instance, values are communicated through the use of memes (Trillò & Shifman 2021: 2495). Furthermore, online groups feature a strong collective identity (Gaudette *et al.* 2021: 3493). A desire for identity and belonging, for being part of something, is an important factor driving people to seek out these extremist online spaces (Gaudette *et al.* 2020: 13). For far-right online communities, this collective identity is often linked to outgroup animosity. In fact, intergroup conflict may coincide with increased group cohesion. One study found that the collective identity of the now-banned Reddit page /TheDonald built on the perceived threat of Muslims and the political left (Gaudette *et al.* 2021: 3501). Another found that intergroup conflict produced a strong ingroup-outgroup contrast, facilitating bonding under a shared collective identity of white supremacy (Bliuc *et al.* 2020: 15).

The internet has facilitated distinct discursive formations, such as the use of framing and emotional or affective structures. Framing in this context constitutes messaging contributing to the gradual adoption of a shared group reality. This, Marwick *et al.* write, might mean the reframing of problems in terms of injustices, placing the blame for these injustices on certain groups or ‘others’, and even justifying political violence (2020: 21). By discursive formations, they refer to the shared meaning-making that occurs within far-right extremist communities as social worlds (Marwick *et al.* 2022: 27). Affective structures may be used to create a sense of emotional affiliation with and within a community. In this sense, social media content may facilitate a sense of a shared emotional experience, linked to a (group) identity. In far-right communities, emotions serve as a vehicle for rationalization and legitimizing activism and ideologies, by framing “whiteness, maleness, and other privileged social identities” as vulnerable groups facing marginalization and oppression (Marwick *et al.* 2022: 27). The elicitation of emotional responses within social movements and groups might as

such be employed by organizations in support of tactical goals (Marwick *et al.* 2022: 27). Marwick *et al.* refer to this “deployment of affect - satire, irony, detachment, or humor” (2022: 32) as a mechanism facilitating the ‘mainstreaming’ of far-right ideas, or their increasing normalization in public spheres. Currently, far-right attitudes and beliefs face strong social scrutiny on the part of ‘mainstream society’, which one study found members of online far-right communities were aware of, going to great lengths to protect their anonymity and prevent being outed to the outside world (Gaudette *et al.* 2020: 14). In part, mainstream media are blamed for the negative reputation of extremist groups. Another discursive feature of far-right online communities, is the creation of increasing distrust in the mainstream media, and in democratic institutions (Marwick *et al.* 2022: 33).

Echo chambers occur when like-minded people feel united in their convictions to an extent that every dissenting source of information is discredited. Nguyen (2020: 145) writes that some politicians have been known to actively enable this, dissuading their followers from taking seriously any news channels and information sources (‘the mainstream media’) they do not approve of. This produces what is referred to as an echo chamber: a community in which a discrepancy is created in the trust accredited to those within the community and those outside of it. The credibility of non-members is actively diminished, whereas that of members is magnified. Agreement in a certain set of beliefs is required for being part of the group, and also support this discrepancy in trust. Echo chambers can be created strategically (Nguyen 2020: 149). Without trust, even evidence will not be enough to convince a person, as there is a great deal of social processing and trust involved in accepting it as true (Nguyen 2020: 150). To break the cycle, Nguyen recommends mending the trust between those within the community and the outside world (2020: 159).

Importantly, online bubbles of like-minded others are not the only contexts that may produce increased intergroup polarization. The same may occur in hyper-partisan environments, where differences between groups are magnified and interactions easily become conflicts (Marwick *et al.* 2022: 32; Rajadesingan 2021: 27). Such environments may foster affective polarization: increased feelings of antagonism and mistrust between outgroups (Marchal 2022: 377). Marchal writes that antagonism by outgroups often drives people to opt out of discussions entirely rather than continue the conversation by retaliating (2022: 390). However, positive intergroup encounters may lead users to feel overall more positively toward an outgroup (Marchal 2022: 390). Another study found that users of a hyper-polarized subreddit often held a host of thinly-based assumptions about outgroup members. However, their findings suggest that additional information about an outgroup member, such as apolitical subreddits both parties were part of, may open parties up to their shared humanity (Rajadesingan 2021: 24).

On a closing note, we need to acknowledge the complexity of the relation between online and offline far-right communities. Taking part in online extremist communities or activism does not automatically coincide with offline violence (Marwick 2022: 31). However, online and offline social worlds do not exist in separate vacuums. They are tightly interwoven. Offline relations such as friends or friend groups often pose an initial step towards seeking out and becoming part of a larger far-right online network (Marwick *et al.* 2022: 25). One study found that offline events such as riots tend to coincide with spikes of activity in online groups, changes in its user bases and group dynamics, and in its group-based norms and values (Bliuc *et al.* 2020: 14). Although the body of research on the online manifestation of far-right ideologies, sentiments and communities is accumulating, there are still a wealth of unanswered questions.

Moral Anthropology

Moral anthropology has become more popular over time. Didier Fassin writes that the present moment is positioned at a historical junction notably preoccupied with doubts and questions about

morality, and the way in which they become part of the public sphere - our social world - through “words, images and practices” (Fassin 2014: 2). This is what according to Fassin constitutes ‘the moral question’: the relation between the moral issues of our time, and the way they are addressed within public spheres. Moral anthropology engages with this question. It is, as such, not a vehicle for moral judgment. Rather, it studies how people for themselves create a logic of what is good (Fassin 2014).

Cheryl Mattingly (2014) conceptualizes moral anthropology as a method for studying people’s striving to live in ways they consider morally worthy. Norms, Mattingly writes, are intrinsically important to people and guide their choices. She writes that people tend to be tormented by what she calls “the threat of moral tragedy” (Mattingly 2014: 11). She furthermore emphasizes that moral anthropology does not operate on the idea that people necessarily act ethically, or are unable to act in destructive, harmful ways. The point is, rather, that people make moral considerations. The object of study here is the way such moral considerations guide people’s choices. Moral judgment is used as a guiding compass throughout a person’s life. It is used to determine how to *thrive*: how to live a life that is not just happy, but fulfilling (Mattingly 2014: 9).

Moral considerations are guided from within. Notably, this ‘self’ is a (partial) product of one’s social surroundings (Mattingly 2014: 8). As nuanced actors embedded in the setting and social world in which we find ourselves, it is precisely our meaningful, first-person experience through which we make sense of our world; through which we perceive reality as something ‘real’ and external to us. We are not only situated within a social world with its many kinds of social structures and practices. We are *engaged* with these practices. We care about them, and they place demands on us (Mattingly 2014: 14).

What follows from Mattingly’s work is the complex relationship between agency and the role of contextual situatedness. What is the role of one’s social surroundings in determining one’s moral framework? Anthropological work by de Koning and Vollenbergh (2019) suggested that the rhetoric that people internalize may be connected to their social demographics and their neighborhoods. Similarly, Mattingly argues that ideas about what constitutes ‘moral worth’ are shaped within specific social contexts, and as such may differ (Mattingly 2014: 50). Throughout her ethnographic research, Mattingly found that people occupy different social spaces (such as school, work, friends, and neighborhoods) each of which have their own moral norms which require navigating. People tend to, subsequently, draw upon these different normative frameworks to construct a ‘moral repertoire’ by which they try to live their lives (Mattingly 2014: 8).

Mattingly (2014: 19) posits that there is an “inherent narrativity” tied to moral practice. Narratives she conceptualizes as an “interpretive framework” which actors use to decide which action to take (Mattingly 2014: 21). We tend to envision personal narrative as tied to our lived experience. We experience our lives, and selves, in temporal terms: we have a past, a present, and a future. Our actions depend on our history, and they, in turn, become part of this history. Part of us. She argues that we conceptualize the actions we take in terms of a transformative journey that leads in a plot-point-like fashion to a moral revelation. Lived experience, in this sense, can be viewed as a project of moral becoming. According to Mattingly, narrative is a useful approach to study these moral journeys, complicated as they are by our ‘thick’, nuanced selves: “socially embedded, historically singular, enduring and emotionally complex” (Mattingly 2014: 18). Narratives are ways to make sense of our doubtful futures and outcomes, and manifold different and conflicting values, interests and communities (Mattingly 2014: 20).

Thus, morality can be understood in terms of evaluations regarding what is ‘good’. These evaluations are intrinsic to us as actors engaged with our world. They are tied to our idea of who we are and who we want to be. Our moral frameworks are shaped by our social surroundings, and are the product of different social worlds in which we find ourselves. They shape our actions, and in turn,

they shape us. They are meaningful, and make our actions feel like something larger and greater than us.

Moral anthropology has for decades received criticism from anthropologists (Dinther 2020: 1006). The brunt of this criticism entails, firstly, that one cannot do anthropological research into morality without taking oneself a moral stance; which, secondly, means that the anthropological requirement for reflexivity causes epistemological and professional-ethical problems (Dinther 2020: 1006). Furthermore critics argue that the study of morality engages with the already difficult balance between cultural relativism and the acknowledgment of oppression and harm (Fassin 2008). Anthropologists are thus required to invoke their own moral framework and project it onto their research population. This raises the issue of imposing upon a research population a moral judgment grounded in power difference and ethnocentrism, which the discipline of anthropology already has a turbulent history with (Fassin 2008: 337).

Fassin argues that even though moral anthropology is criticized, moral concerns have over the past decades guided anthropological study into the lives of the oppressed and the stigmatized (Fassin 2008: 340). As is a tendency of humanity, he says, anthropology always engages with value judgment (Fassin 2008: 341). Researchers are valued beings, whose own moral frameworks and value judgments always necessitate reflection. Moral anthropology focuses on moral issues, but evaluating these is not the aim. Rather, it is to critically study the way morality manifests within a context. In this sense moral anthropology should always be epistemologically and ethically difficult for researchers (Fassin: 341). I agree with both Fassin and Dinther that the concerns raised are of value, and should continuously guide the reflexive process of the researcher. This does not negate the value of moral anthropology. I aim to follow up on Fassin's recommendation to 'consider the anthropologist's own moral prejudices – or in a more neutral way, value judgements – as objects of his scientific investigation as well as those of his "others"' (Fassin 2008: 337).

Freedom, Censorship and Responsibility

Introduction

When I initially embarked on my fieldwork, I was convinced that I had at least some notion of what my interlocutors believed in. I thought their ideology would feature mostly opposition: opposition to multiculturalism, to progressive policy interventions, and specifically to outgroups. I had envisioned these to be clear and outspoken, and was interested in uncovering the moral logic underneath. I thought I was prepared at least for the fact that this would be a challenge. I was not prepared, however, to completely break open my own narrative logic and subsequently undergo a revision of everything I thought I understood of society; knowledge and right and wrong. When my interlocutors explained what they stood for, they never answered ‘for the Netherlands to finally belong to the Dutch again’, or ‘for all migration flows to stop’. Rather, they spoke of freedom. They spoke of wanting to make their own choices as agents, free from control, with as their guide their individual sense of responsibility rather than restrictions imposed from the outside.

The coming chapter addresses my interlocutors’ moral logic as they explained it. It will focus on the key elements of freedom, control and responsibility. Thus, it poses the first conceptual step in understanding the moral logic of far-right partisans, how these elements of logic interact with my interlocutors’ perceptions of being morally judged and blamed, and how the populist party Forum voor Democratie may capitalize on these to instill distrust and aversion in the democratic system.

Freedom from institutional control

Freedom was greatly valued by my interlocutors. It was freedom which inspired their protest against governmental restrictions during the pandemic. Their longing for freedom of expression which fueled their opposition to a kind of censorship my respondents universally referred to as ‘woke’. A central appreciation for personal responsibility which can only exist within a context in which freedom of choice, speech and freedom of information exists as well.

What came up often was the idea that governments, along with the mainstream media and universities shape and control our thoughts, and therefore impede on our freedom. My research population had a clear feeling that governments were untrustworthy. I realized this was a narrative element which set apart my own ideas and worldview from theirs. Here follows an excerpt from a Reddit chat interview which captures this clearly. I had asked the following question:

When I look at political correctness/taboo myself, I think I assume that people are capable of inflicting great harm on each other when ideas like Hitler's or the Rwandan genocide reach a large part of a population who have felt shortchanged for some time - for whom those ideas are reasons to incite violence. That the government plays some kind of role in this, to ensure that those thoughts do not become legitimate and start to take on a life of their own. I'm wondering how you see that?

The respondent said to this,

(...) is precisely the government that hurts people. Hitler was the German government when he killed all those Jews. I think that if there had been honest and transparent information, Hitler would not have come to power. Hitler applied a form of censorship, choosing what information to give and what not to give. If he'd told

everyone that you wanted to build concentration camps so he could kill as many people as possible, he wouldn't have gotten so many votes (u/Fear_the_waffle).

He points out that this line of thinking betrayed my blind trust in the government. To him, approving of government control was the same as opposing freedom. I had to admit he had a point. Trust in the Dutch government had been a given for me. This, to me, did not mean blind trust that any decision or intervention was correct or even productive. However, it was trust in their legitimacy; their accountability; and in the democratic system as a whole. Governments wield large amounts of power over citizens, but I believed that the Netherlands hosts safeguards which keep this power in check. In my eyes, those norms and values that taboos or censorship guard, are not pushed onto us by an institutional power, but stem from society itself. The government and other institutional powers, in my eyes, are simply tasked with guarding these.

User /Fear_the_waffle didn't share these convictions. To him, a critical source of legitimacy was missing. He felt that this, and democracy as a whole, requires complete transparency of information on all accounts.

People must be able to decide for themselves and open information provision is essential for this. That's what democracy essentially is (u/Fear_the_waffle).

A government which suppresses any type of information or discussion cannot be held accountable. It withholds from its populace the power to form informed opinions and make informed decisions. This meant that he was deeply opposed to any type of censorship, or any type of suppression of information, be it by governments or big companies.

I find those thoughts a bit naive and they also have a somewhat arrogant undertone (certainly not meant as a personal insult to you, I'll explain what I mean by that undertone) (...) The arrogant undertone is in the fact that you're basically saying you believe there are people who should filter information so that other people don't misinterpret that information. This implies to some extent that you think you can interpret information better than others (u/Fear_the_waffle).

I realized that my trust in an authority tasked with filtering and censoring ideas and information that might be harmful to society, indeed betrays a belief that some are more fit than others in light of their knowledge, in light of their expertise and authority, to decide whether an idea is safe for consumption. This implies a belief that some are worthy of moral authority, whereas others should be protected from themselves.

The element of institutional trust exposed a critical difference. During a Zoom interview, user /MadeyesNL, who also considers himself politically left-wing, conveyed a view much similar to mine.

It's not as if we still trust what the pastor tells us. You know, 'that's a learned man so he will know'. We don't even trust the fucking doctor anymore who has been constantly studying for six years or twenty years. And I'm on Facebook for a few days and I know better. That that trust is gone is very bizarre (u/MadeyesNL).

This set apart our point of view from that of most other people I observed and spoke to. Like him, I trust expertise: I trust doctors to have knowledge that I do not have and cannot have. I trust them to have taken an oath to help those in need; to believe in using their knowledge to the benefit of others. I believe in the trustworthiness of Dutch institutions that safeguard these principles. I believe the Dutch

government comprises people who generally believe in ideals of freedom, and that the Dutch political system represents its citizens and lends them a voice.

But what if I did not? What if I was wary of governmental power? What if I learned of authoritarian governments' use of censorship and manipulation to control citizen's knowledge, thoughts and feelings? What if I heard someone like myself say that it is reasonable for a moral authority to decide which information is fit for me to process? Would I worry? Would I perceive a large group within my society to be indifferent to the deterioration of their freedom - to handing it over to institutions on the grounds of their power and legitimacy? Would those thoughts feel, to me, more than naive? Would they feel dangerous? It's hard to say for sure, but the thought is less foreign now.

The pandemic also played an important role in my interlocutors' experience of institutional control. The Dutch government, like many others, imposed restrictive measures that were intensified when infection rates went up, and loosened when they slowed down. This was the way of things for much of 2020, all of 2021 and the three-month period in 2022 documented by the study at hand. For many people I spoke to, these restrictions were a source of discontent. One user who wished to stay anonymous, said the following during an interview over Reddit chat:

You now see in the past 2 years that many people have woken up, this is because they have also been literally and figuratively shaken up and are now forced by less pleasant circumstances to think and investigate and take a critical look at the world.

He refers to the circumstances of the pandemic as a driving factor for 'many people' to conduct their own investigations and subsequently become critical with the world in which we live. By 'woken up', he means that they have become convinced of the existence of theories of malignant conspiracies. This is a complex phenomenon that will be explored in the third empirical chapter, focusing on the way right-wing narratives are used and weaponized by the populist party Forum voor Democratie. In regards to the restrictive Corona measures fueling discontent with the Dutch government, a similar view was articulated by user /No_K3tchup:

I think the state is too concerned with everything and everyone. And that has of course come to its climax in the Corona crisis. Down to the smallest detail, everyone's life is... they're trying to micromanage them. And, yeah, I'm not really happy with that [*laughs*] (u/No_K3thup).

This was a sentiment shared by many people I talked to, and expressed in many conversations I observed. The circumstances of the pandemic were considered to pose a window for the Dutch government to seize control of citizens' lives. Many seemed to feel that the government willfully made use of its power to influence citizens' behavior and force them to conform. This was seen as an infringement of their freedom.

Freedom of expression

This notion of forced conformity ties into the next point. Namely, my respondents were universal in their aversion to political correctness. They referred to this as 'woke'. It was deemed to demonstrate inauthenticity and unwillingness to engage in open conversation or be transparent in one's views and motives. It clashed with their preference for honesty, openness and transparency, and ultimately their preference for freedom of expression.

Although the term ‘political correctness’ was frequently used, it was not limited to politics but also denoted censorship in the broader public sphere. Political correctness was viewed to be a feature of a left-wing political identity. As a term, it was often used interchangeably with ‘cancel culture’ and ‘woke’. It refers to the perceived left-wing use of speech norms to constrain the thoughts and ideas that are acceptable to be voiced. All my interlocutors agreed that this was the case, and some harbored strong feelings about it. The perceived consequences of not conforming to these constraints were considerable. For example, the use of social pressure to publicly shun someone, incite an angry mob or to get someone fired from their job. Being ‘canceled’ this way was a real fear for some of my participants, who sometimes told me outwardly that they were afraid I would ‘dox’ them, out them for having controversial opinions. Political correctness was simultaneously seen as a performance of tolerance and moral superiority, and a way of concealing one’s true convictions and never having to defend or answer for them.

Political correctness speech norms do constrain freedom of expression, however, I realized that to me does not disqualify them. Rather, I saw them as serving a function of conveying respect and civility. This is especially important in politics, where discussions are tense and disagreement is frequent. Respect is a way to recognize that, even in the face of differences, we all want the best way forward. We are allies in this. This difference was evidenced when I asked user /Free_the_waffle, who had previously been especially outspoken in his valuation of freedom in all its forms, how he saw the relationship between respect and freedom of expression.

The relationship between freedom of expression and respect is very clear to me. Respect is much less important than freedom of expression. Freedom of expression is the absolute building block of free Western civilization. Respect is nice to have and important in many situations, but I can’t exactly say that Donald Trump has been respected during his term as president and yet he has accomplished a lot (u/Free_the_waffle).

He went on to explain that in his eyes, the point is not that everybody has to agree with each other, or has to like each other, or even has to be civil. Rather, it was that we have to engage with one another. We have to discuss, be open in our true thoughts and convictions, and be willing to disagree.

By the way, do you know how you command the most and fastest respect in my eyes? By speaking the truth. Without censorship and filter. That’s how you gain respect (u/Free_the_waffle).

This was also how he motivated his support for the presidency of Donald Trump over that of Joe Biden. Political correctness was, to him, choosing words to make yourself seem like you’re good and honest and moral, and simultaneously hide behind them. It displaces focus from your actions, to your projected integrity of character.

Do you want to be politically correct and make it seem like you are a good person?
Or do you really want to be a good person with the results your actions bring, even if it sometimes makes you less popular (u/Free_the_waffle)?

I said that undoubtedly Trump speaks his mind more than most presidents, but I could deduce from my respondent’s answer that that doesn’t necessarily make him a bad president. I asked whether he felt that Trump was a good president despite his way of talking and thinking, or because of it. He replied the following:

He says more what he thinks than any other president and that makes him the best president at least in the 38 years I've been alive (u/Free_the_waffle).

For this interviewee, living in freedom entailed genuine transparency, openness and freedom of expression without constraint. He was an absolutist in this. Other interviewees had a more moderate stance. One anonymous interviewee said that freedom of expression should be absolute, but that there was a limit: threat of violence. Another interviewee said to value freedom of expression higher than respect, but said that choosing your words to be kind and considerate of others' feelings does not have to mean limiting yourself.

I personally find freedom of expression much more important than respect. Ultimately, I am responsible for what I say, not how you feel about it. That doesn't mean you have to be a disrespectful dick all the time of course. (...) It is perfectly possible to express your opinion in a friendly way without using a word of French. And I do my best for that. It's no use to talk to people who feel offended. Then they won't listen anymore (u/T1b3rium).

Thus, to them it is possible to be both respectful and genuine. They recognized the importance of freedom of expression, but also the practical benefits of being considerate of others' feelings in your choices of words: it makes people more willing to hear what you say. Later, they explained that there is a balance to this.

If, on the other hand, you make your fear of insulting or hurting someone the guiding principle, you limit your own freedom of expression. That's something I don't do (u/T1b3rium).

The tension between freedom of expression and respect came up frequently. One user who wished to stay anonymous, wrote the following during a Reddit chat interview:

(...) Since Gamergate in 2014 the amount of censorship, moderation, and manipulation on social media has increased extremely. A lot of things are forbidden to say or will get you banned, some people even get the police at the door. Free speech is dead and entire societies are controlled and manipulated by it.

'Gamergate' concerns 2014 events where some gaming communities spurred large-scale social media attacks on so-called Social Justice Warriors (SJWs): feminists, often female, who use their own platforms for condemning strands of thought considered oppressive, backward and dangerous (Bezio 2018: 561). The attackers viewed them to constrain freedom of expression and opinion. The events are surrounded by a rush of interpretations and accusations, but ultimately come down to this: some, the initial 'attackers' from the gaming community, consider freedom of expression to be under threat, which they felt warranted vehement defense (MSOGameShow 2015). The other side says that there have to be limits to freedom of expression. The consequence was a call for additional protection through censorship and control. The user I spoke to described Gamergate as a 'very important event in the history of the internet and in the culture war that is now raging in the west'.

To my interlocutors this preference for freely available information and transparency furthermore meant a commitment and true willingness to be critical and search for unbiased, trustworthy sources to find out the actual truth. Although they each motivated their strategy by saying

it was 'rational', this held different meanings to different people. To user /Free_the_waffle, it meant making a commitment to be vigilant and search for information from different sources, to arrive at a conclusion that is as unbiased as possible.

It is certainly difficult to get your bearings in all the resources out there. I try to follow different sources, to get both sides of the story. For me great inspirations are Jordan Peterson, Joe Rogan, Tim Pool, Brett Weinstein. Many people probably run to their safe space at your social studies when they hear those names 😊, but they give a nuanced picture of current events (u/Fear_the_waffle).

Freedom of information and opinion was thus considered essential to society. This was a value shared by my interlocutors, and central to their political narrative and worldview. They expressed a desire for transparency, honesty and openness (both as a means to live their lives, and for the politicians they support) and strongly disliked the social sanctions brought on by 'woke' attitudes. There was an awareness of the social stigma that went hand-in-hand with support for controversial policies and political parties, and their true political beliefs were either kept secret from those in their offline social circles or were described as something to 'admit'. Three separate interviewees expressed worries that I would 'dox them': would out them to their offline surroundings for having opinions considered socially unacceptable. For many of these participants, censorship and dishonesty were uncomfortable, repellent things. They each recognized wanting to voice their thoughts freely, and highly valued any such space if they found it. Yet, they themselves recognized that to feel socially safe, self-censorship was often required.

Responsibility

Thus, living in freedom meant, to my interlocutors, making their own choices free from government control; freedom to form, harbor and voice one's own opinions, free from harm from those who disagree. On a surface level, I could see the appeal. Freedom is what everyone wants, and a great deal of the meaning of human existence would disappear without it. Yet, freedom without bounds was far from reconcilable with my view of reality. We have to limit our freedom in some ways, not to impede on others'. We need laws and regulations to coexist in a society made up of people who differ in so many ways.

Over time, I learned that my interlocutors did have a regulating mechanism in mind. However, it was not imposed and enforced by a power and authority they did not trust or believe in. Rather, they believed behavior should be regulated by a sense of responsibility within.

One interviewee who held an especially strong stance on personal responsibility, was user /T1b3rium. They found responsibility important both in regards to freedom of expression, and in regard to freedom in its broader sense.

I think responsibility is a very important thing. Outside [freedom of expression] as well. But in my opinion, if you say something you should stand for it (you can of course repent) I think that's why I'm not really a fan of politics. It's a lot of words and promises, but politicians don't take responsibility for them. Within the discussion of [freedom of expression], I mainly hear that the other party is held responsible.

They are nazi/communist

They have insulted me

They are stupid

That way you place responsibility outside yourself and you make yourself innocent and being innocent is easy (u/T1b3rium).

To u/T1b3rium, responsibility in the context of freedom of expression, means to ‘stand for it’: to stick with what you have said, and face possible repercussions. To them, arguments for limiting freedom of expression all too often entail that others are made to be responsible for a person’s experiences and opinions. They find that one can only truly hold oneself responsible, and be responsible for oneself. In this context, this responsibility mainly concerns responsibility for one’s own feelings.

I don't know what is offensive to you so I can't take responsibility for it. In addition, I believe that you are responsible for your own emotions. So I'm not insulting you. You perceive my words as insulting. I think quite stoically about that. Again I'm really not being a jerk to everyone and I'm just amicable (u/T1b3rium).

The notion of responsibility for one’s own feelings was their pivotal argument in arguing for freedom of expression. As was discussed over the previous section on freedom of expression, I know that the debate tends to hinge on the notion of respect versus freedom. Here, this narrows down to other persons’ feelings and dignity, versus the freedom to express oneself. Personal responsibility seems to solve the debate: one may choose to be considerate of others or they may not. Either way, their feelings and dignity are not their responsibility.

This argument was echoed by u/Fear_the_waffle. In a discussion on the responsibility of Donald Trump in inciting mob violence, he said the following.

Everything you hear and read about [Donald Trump] is so incredibly twisted. I watched the speech live and he literally said that people should go to the Capitol and make their voices heard peacefully and respectfully. Then he is not responsible for the violence that some people cause. That's a really cheap way to vilify him. Is Selena Gomez responsible for the death threats Justin Bieber receives from Selena's Twitter followers? Is Thom de Graaf responsible for the murder of Pim Fortuyn, because he associated him with Anne Frank and made very inflammatory statements about him? No!! Donald Trump is responsible for the words and actions of Donald Trump. And he has called on the entire mob to remain peaceful (u/Fear_the_waffle).

In the wake of the presidential elections of 2021, a crowd of angry Trump supporters had stormed the Capitol building in Washington DC, resulting in several deaths (Gambino 2022). The case demonstrates the extent to which interpretations of a single event can tell a different story entirely. A Tweet by Trump had said, ‘The so-called “Rush on the Capitol” was not caused by me, it was caused by a Rigged and Stolen Election!’ (Gambino 2022). An investigation is taking place at the time of writing to determine whether Trump should legally be faulted for the storming of the Capitol. According to Gambino (2022) evidence suggests that Trump consciously incited his followers to engage in violence, even in the face of warnings from friends, family, and party members alike.

The view articulated by u/Fear_the_waffle demonstrates the complexity of the notion of responsibility in my interlocutors’ eyes. Although the mob was enraged as a partial consequence of Trump’s assertions of fraud, he himself ought not to be held responsible for the storming. Rather, responsibility rests with the mob itself. One cannot be held responsible for what others feel and think,

let alone their actions. This is regardless of whether they served as an inspiration or influence for them. This conceptualization of personal responsibility appears definite, firm and simple. At the same time it is an oversimplification of the influence and interdependence that determines our lives as an intelligent, social species living in community with one another.

This notion of personal responsibility often touches upon wider political discussions on blame and responsibility, and on the principle of the welfare state.

But I do think that we should talk more about responsibility. You hear a lot x is my right but your rights are someone else's responsibility. For example, all working people contribute to the AOW of the elderly, their right to a pension and the compulsory contribution of working people. just as an example (u/T1b3rium).

To me personally, living in a society inherently comes with interdependence. We share responsibility as well as access to safety nets should we ever find ourselves in a position of need. At the same time, some of my interlocutors doubted the distribution of this responsibility. This seems to flow from a difference in interpretation of the principles underpinning it. Furthermore, my interlocutors showed a general distrust of whether governments could, or perhaps should be counted on to provide for them. This coincided with the institutional distrust they often held.

Furthermore, I noted that personal responsibility held an almost mythical quality. It painted a picture of honor, of being a free agent, and of having only oneself to thank or blame for one's achievements. User /Fear_the_waffle explained on one occasion that he previously lived a life without much purpose. This changed when he came upon Jordan Peterson: a psychologist, speaker and Youtube personality. I watched one of his videos upon recommendation by u/Fear_the_waffle, and was struck by how genuinely and earnestly Peterson preached: mainly to 'stop unnecessary suffering', and for 'creating your own purpose' by working to 'burden yourself with so much responsibility that you can barely stand, and then you'll get stronger trying to lift it up' (M4tchB0X3r 2017). There was also a lot he opposed: for instance the 'dismantling of the patriarchy', identity politics and the overturning of oppressive structures altogether. I know that he has a reputation for misogyny, and for being a 'father figure' for young men struggling to find their way in a world of 'diversity, gender neutrality and alleged spiritual emptiness' (Bahara 2021). I carefully asked u/Fear_the_waffle about this:

Some ideas did clash with my personal view, but I'm also curious how you see that: he seemed to say that inequality is not something students should worry about because they are at the top of the pyramid themselves. How do you see that? What is inequality, and is there a responsibility attached to it for those who get more opportunities/have more money?

He is swift to respond, saying the following.

What you are doing now is really dangerous. "What he seemed to say". This is one of the smartest people and one of the great speakers of our time. He doesn't need anyone to interpret what he seems to be saying. What he says is what he says.

(...) Jordan Peterson is my biggest inspiration in my life and I dare even say he saved my life. Through his honest and inspiring words, with which he tells everyone who wants to hear that your life has meaning, if you take as much responsibility as

possible on your shoulders. So much that it almost weighs you down, and then you get stronger if you can carry it.

(...) This may be getting very personal, but my life has meaning because of this man. And if you don't listen to him, but what your professors tell you about what they "think he means" (though even more often it's willfully twisting his words), you'd think he's right-wing or evil or whatever. But he's one of the best people in the world, honestly. You should really listen to him, this man will change your life (u/Fear_the_waffle).

He accredited Peterson with his self image, inspiration, family and even his life. I remember trying to picture what it must be like to accredit all these things to a person, and hear them being regularly vilified in (primarily) left-wing circles. I realized that much of how this user looked at the world was infused by a quest for identity and meaning and purpose. And that, had I been too quick in making the deductive jump to assert that this interviewee was in fact a misogynist based on the online communities in which he found himself, I would miss out on a wealth of insight and nuance that was now bared to me.

Additionally, personal responsibility often came up in the context of discrimination and inequality. Perceptions of being blamed or held responsible for others' experiences of inequality, conflict with the sense of individual responsibility that marked my interlocutors' narrative worldview. This came up in my discussion with an anonymous interviewee who had shifted from left-wing to right-wing politics in part due to their frustration with political correctness, forced conformity and hiring quota. She is non-white herself, and expressed that she felt strongly averse to the idea of being hired for a company because of diversity quota. She used the word 'Excustruus', referring to someone being hired not for their merits but because a company needs to meet a standard.

The notion of merit in relation to personal responsibility also came up in my discussion with user /T1b3rium. They acknowledged the impact of discrimination and inequality in shaping the opportunities available to a person, but still valued personal responsibility.

For myself, I prefer to judge as much as possible on the merits of the person, that is what you have influence on. Not your skin color. but if I'm honest I also judge outside those merits. If I'm walking down the street and I see a group of loiterers, I avoid them. I judge purely on appearance and my own prejudices. For the same money they are very friendly loitering youths. But loiterers simply don't have a good reputation, so I avoid them. I don't give them a chance to improve (u/T1b3rium).

They wanted to judge others based on their choices, but also acknowledged the influence of her own actions in maintaining existing patterns of inequality and discrimination.

You can only take responsibility for yourself in the end. That means setting goals and moving towards them. And that is quite hard for most. I myself come from a privileged family, both parents together, no money problems and so on. But that doesn't mean I didn't have to work for my bachelor's degree or achievements. That requires a certain mindset. One where you should not see yourself as a victim, but as a perpetrator (...) (/T1b3rium).

Later, they added,

If racists stand in your way, of course that sucks. It's annoying not being hired because of your skin color. But I don't think that's an excuse to give up. I do not believe that the Netherlands is full of racists, but in general good people who want the best for themselves and their environment. (although it can be debated which is best) (/T1b3rium).

This demonstrates how the notion of responsibility coexists with the acknowledgement of limiting circumstances and inequality produced by structural racism. Inequality and racism exist, she argues, but even if one experiences racism there is room to make a life for oneself. Thus, there is always individual responsibility to be taken.

Conclusion

Many of my interlocutors felt disgruntled at the way the world was developing, and were wary of the institutional powers governing it. The celebration of freedom and responsibility seem to be a way to cope with these shifts, by reclaiming one's agency and achievements. They felt that these current-day circumstances were shifting the cultural order in a way that was actively taking their power away. They felt that their freedom was being constricted, and that they were being forced to adapt to cultural pressures that simultaneously limited them, blamed them and disqualified them on a deeper level. They argued that they earned their power and achievements, and that minorities should take their own responsibility and do the same.

These frustrations were placed opposite an ideal of freedom. They looked to find their place in the world, and longed to make their own choices, free from cultural pressures and institutional control. In their eyes, life as a human being should not be characterized by succumbing to pressures, but by being free, and acting upon this freedom guided by one's own responsibility.

The following chapter will discuss how my interlocutors positioned themselves in the changing sociocultural narratives which they resented, and how they defended their value under pressures they felt constricted, discounted and disqualified by.

Morality, Blame and the Charge of Racism

Introduction

Over the previous chapter I explored the value of freedom that my interlocutors valued highly, which should be navigated by way of individual responsibility. The people I spoke to were by and large extremely adept at explaining this view, and were very convincing. There were moments when I found myself completely engrossed in their worldview, and inspired by the purpose and vigor it implied.

However, I realized in time that this narrative omits some important elements of what it means to be human and live in the society in which we find ourselves. Namely, it precludes the existence of racism, discrimination and inequality: factors which by definition limit freedom, and limit the extent to which one can exercise their responsibility. There was a missing puzzle piece there.

Raising that issue was usually a turning point in the conversations, which made it all the more clear that it was worth investigating. During most interviews, the first half of the conversation discussed topics my interviewees were interested in. I made clear that I was aware of my own narrative bubble as a left-wing university student, and was interested in hearing what life and society was like to them. They initially usually had a lot to say about the image problem of the right wing, and the misunderstanding and judgment it produced. Often they attempted to correct this by illustrating what right-wing politics stood for. Sometimes these topics were the neglect of the working class; sometimes they were housing shortages; sometimes they were freedom of expression and information. At a certain point during the discussions, I tended to ask my interviewees how they felt about inequality and racism in Dutch society. It quickly became clear that it was not a topic that inspired the same energy. Instead, it tended to interrupt conversation and divert it from its course. Often, interviewees initially acknowledged that 'it exists', but were then quite unclear in their views on what 'it' was, or meant to them. Even if I prodded, their answers sometimes changed. The unanimous sentiment was that everyone essentially wants the same thing: for as many people as possible to live well.

Initially, this was a source of frustration. It took some time before I realized that the very convictions and ideas motivating my research were also hindering me in getting the insights I sought. Namely, my research population strongly believed that they were morally judged by 'leftists', who they understood to invalidate their ideas and experience, and paint them as unworthy, corrupt or lesser. This posed a key element to their narrative of being misunderstood and politically excluded.

Over the course of this chapter I will discuss the many ways in which the notion of moral judgment and blame came up, and how these concepts, along with perceptions of being seen and treated as being of less value, relate to the way my interlocutors explain and regard concepts of racism and inequality.

Aversion to moral authority

The following section will explore the notion of the 'left-wing elite'. It was a key trope in what my interlocutors' explained as feelings of being treated as being of lesser value, and being treated as morally corrupt.

My research participants commonly held the view that there exists a left-wing elite in society which simultaneously enjoys privileges of power, money and status; has no idea what the poor people in society are going through; pushes for ineffective, short-term solutions to the wrong problems; continuously appeals to compassion in regard to discussions and problems requiring rationality; and, importantly, uses such moral appeals to disqualify dissidents and paint them as less worthy or morally

inferior. This contributes to a picture of a powerful, arrogant group that is unwilling to listen, compromise or even truly enter into discussion with this research group. The term implied, generally, power. Sometimes it denoted the government; sometimes universities; sometimes the highly-educated; and sometimes the rich. Usually it meant all of these in tandem and projected them onto the left wing. Over time I became convinced that the term 'elite' is a placeholder. It represents a wealth of narratives, stances and opinions, but mainly denotes an enemy group that 'considers itself better' than everyone else. This shows for instance in this short excerpt from my talk with Reddit user /Free_the_waffle.

What left-wing politics (or the anti-freedom side, or the elite side, give it a name) is doing now, is doing politics based on emotion (u/Free_the_waffle).

He demonstrated here that the term 'elite' is to him interchangeable with being 'anti-freedom', and with left-wing politics as a whole. The exact meaning of the word was articulated plainly in a comment under a Reddit thread:

By elite I mean people who feel morally superior to the people and have such resources that their own 'plans' only really affect others. Sustainability, refugees and negative consequences of the EU in 2022 (there are advantages, but certainly also disadvantages) which they don't want to experience in their own backyard is also very fitting; they do not pay the real bill themselves and do pick on 'the people'. Despite my own financial status which would have placed me in the elite ranks, I am very contrary to these factors that I have encountered a lot in my social environment and work and study background.

Here, the term is used to refer to a considerable number of assumptions, all tied to the idea that the elite is better off somehow. The user makes the remark that the term implies financial affluence. However, even though they themselves could be considered wealthy, they do not consider themselves 'elite' based on the fact that they are ideologically opposed to what they consider typical to the elite: a morally superior attitude and indifference to other people's circumstances.

This sentiment was similarly explained in a comment under a different Reddit post made by user /DanishMadness (2022). The post discussed an article on Afghan asylum seekers said to be dissatisfied with the way the Dutch government has handled their entry into the Netherlands. In the comment section there was a clearly distinguishable narrative around migration that seemed to garner much agreement. It was that of either a failing Dutch government, crafting laws and legislations that are unattainable and that they themselves are too far removed from (by way of their power and status) to experience the actual consequences, which are in fact faced by the 'real Dutch citizens'; or the idea that asylum seekers should be grateful that the Netherlands is taking them in at all ("het gore lef"), and should be sent back to their countries of origin if they aren't satisfied with what they are given - it can always be worse. The two elements here are, firstly, the elite and privileged who make policies that are unrealistic and have adverse consequences on 'us', the normal people (misunderstood, ignored, burdened and even mocked), and foreigners (unwelcome, violent, ungrateful, taking advantage). There was an idea articulated of being misunderstood and marginalized in favor of a spoiled and ungrateful outgroup. One comment summarizes the sentiment well:

Because the people who stimulate this policy (eg Kaag) are all those diplomats children who grew up in neighborhoods where they earned 6x the average and there was no asylum seeker in the area at all. That is why they do not understand why

people (mainly those with low incomes) are always so against it and therefore vote for parties such as PVV and FVD.

This again implies the existence of an elite that attempts to use their power to wield control over society, without truly understanding the positions of people who don't live in privilege. The element of control also followed from the following interview with Reddit user /Free_the_waffle.

(...) And censorship especially affects everything that people who consider themselves better don't want to be heard. There is an elite worldwide who think they are better and know better than the normal people. And that is why they must determine what we do and do not hear and see and read. This is our politics nationally, but there are also organizations that are involved in this globally.

He was particularly interested in the suppression and censorship of information. To him it is the elite which withholds information from common people, and considers itself fit to decide which information should be made accessible and which should be censored. He related this to governmental control, and to organizations worldwide who similarly use their power to dictate how people in other parts of the world should live. Over a Zoom interview, Reddit user /No_K3tchup similarly explained,

For example, uh, there is also talk about extra tax on sugar and on meat, and on... I don't know, things like that. And about CO2 taxes and all that sort of thing. And then I think, that's nice when you live there in your ivory tower with your master in your pocket, I don't know, in the canal belt [*of Amsterdam*], but all those people you try to help... Yes, they're maybe just making ends meet, and if they also have to pay extra tax for a steak and also have to pay extra for, uh, I don't know, for gas and... and often the people at the very bottom of society are the people who smoke, and (...) then you can say it is to help people, but in the meantime you are actually making people poorer. And yeah, so you can ask yourself whether you really help people with that.

This excerpt shows how the elite, high-and-mighty leftist is positioned against the poor of Dutch society who are both forgotten and strongly affected by their misguided actions, while the elite itself remains unaffected by these poor choices by virtue of their money and power. Another interviewee, Reddit user /T1b3rium, who was more moderate on most standpoints, said on this,

I don't feel that the interests of the workers come to the fore anymore on the right [*than in leftwing politics*]. PVV pretends, but in terms of votes you see that they don't really live up to it. Traditionally, the right doesn't focus on the worker, but more on the entrepreneur in my opinion. On the other hand, I don't think the worker really comes to the fore in left-wing politics either. In the SP supposedly, but in campaigns it doesn't really come across as strong in my opinion. I think the PVDA is also working on returning to the worker. the other left-wing parties are too concerned with climate, refugee policy and the bullshit in the margins that we call woke.

She never mentioned the 'elite' in any explicit terms. She did say that she doesn't consider there to be a true political representation for the working class: there is no party that caters explicitly to their needs. She also mentions that she sees especially the left-wing parties as being overly preoccupied

with issues of climate, refugee policy and 'woke' attitudes or political correctness, to the detriment of the working class.

Thus, I hope to have demonstrated that my research group held a common perception of an 'elite' within our society that both wields a disproportionate amount of power and considers everyone else to be inferior in terms of knowledge and morality. This superiority was seen as a justification for their unwillingness to share their power to those who have less of it. This elite held an almost symbolic meaning, and was the object of a shared aversion. The core of it seemed to be that my interlocutors felt that this elite did not recognize their value or dignity.

It was believed that those on the left tend to cast moral judgment on those on the right. These moral judgments were viewed as a way to disqualify their views and positions. This came up often, and was strongly felt. It was acknowledged by all participants, including those who considered themselves to be more moderately right-wing, and the one interviewee who is left-wing himself. It came up often in many Reddit discussions, as well as during the in-person FVD campaign rallies that I attended.

When my interviewees discussed this moral judgment, they usually initially spoke of it in terms of a personal preference for rationality and realism. Regardless of their differing views, interests and backgrounds, all people I talked to shared this preference. 'Rationality' was often used together with terms like 'objectivity', 'realism' and being 'critical'. This idea came up on every research site I frequented. It contrasted emotional, idealistic left-wing politics geared toward short-term solutions, against right-wing politics able to see and willing to admit the difficult problems that society faces. It meant seeing the truth in all its nuance, even if that truth contradicted a sunny, optimistic image of humanity favored by left-wing policies of affirmative action. Even if that truth is not considered to be 'desirable'. It took me quite some time to realize that what this proclaimed preference really was, was a reply.

Although the notion of 'rational' right-wing politics came up often, I realized in time that there was a pattern to it. It was most frequently invoked as a response and counter-argument to the perceived 'emotionality' of leftist political logic. It was a broadly applicable, readily available argument, accusation and defense. It was invoked most-often in instances where political dissidents disagreed with one another and when discussion entailed controversiality itself. The interviewee who wished to remain anonymous, described this emotionality as one of the things that caused her shift from left- to right-wing politics.

(...) because I thought there was, uh, too much emotion involved in politics. And of course, as I said, politics without emotions is not possible, but I didn't think it was rational enough.

Later, she went on to explain what this meant.

But I noticed that when I started to speak out as- of course, of course I have a different background - you can see that now, of course, but I have a foreign background. Um, and when I started speaking out about the anti-racism demonstrations being too black-and-white for me, and actually wrote a politically correct piece about it, I noticed that people were quick to take offense. That I really got that card of, yes, but you've also experienced discrimination and racism, so how can you think like that? That I think yes, but that's too... er, emotional.

She related a preoccupation with emotionality to an experience of (hypocritical) moral judgment as a means to force her to conform to a certain opinion she did not have. It illustrates a contradiction: it appeared to her that in the name of tolerance, she was expected to conform to a certain opinion solely

based on her ethnic identity. Rationality was invoked in response to what she perceived to be an intolerance towards her divergent opinion, which was deemed to be morally flawed. She furthermore said to prefer right-wing politics for their realistic view on fairness and on how the world works. In her view, left-wing politics tends to prioritize an overly ideological view of what is 'ideal', over what is 'realistic'.

In some cases things are not fair, and then I also think that you really have to fight for it because that is not right, but I do think that I have started to look at the world more realistically. Eh I think, that idealistic image keeps some people standing and then they should definitely stick with that image. Um but I just notice... I have my ideals but I'm also realistic and I think that- that's a good balance.

Furthermore, the general frustration with the excessive emotionality of left-wing politics was often explained by way of left-wing policy itself. These policies were deemed 'too giving' and willfully blind to important and perhaps undesirable factors at play. Right-wing policies by contrast were thought to think ahead to the actual practicalities and long-term effects of the intervention. In discussing these detrimental effects, often poor, Dutch, working-class citizens were named as an example. They were depicted as the victims of the proud, left-wing mindset and its glaring blindspots. One user explained during a Zoom interview,

I just think that, say, the simple solution, the solution that is obvious... So for example, just, leveling [*salaries*], that's one such example. That's often where the left goes. And the right thinks a little further ahead about it as far as I'm concerned. Like yes, you know, we can tax everyone to death, but at a certain point there will only be more people unemployed or homeless, or something, you know? Um, so yeah, it's not just... You can level a bit, but you also have to remember that there has to be an investment climate and people have to have some left over to pay their bills... (u/no_K3tchup)

Again there is a view articulated here of left-wing politics distinct in their use of impractical policies in pursuit of some higher ideal, to the detriment of poorer citizens. The same interviewee later went on to say the following.

They act like – if you don't want to throw 35 billion into the climate hole – you're pretending you don't care that people die or something, you know? That kind of nonsense. The same with corona of course, then they also act as if you don't care that people die. Uh, and with refugees and asylum seekers the same story, then it's always like 'yes, but those poor people', and then I think, yes those poor people, but [*laughs*] well, yes, you can't take in the whole world and we have also a shop to watch, so to speak. (/No_K3tchup)

From this excerpt we can distill a distinction between morality and practicality. In this view, protests to policies on the grounds of their impracticality tend to elicit accusations of being opposed to the ideal itself. Moral goals, then, lead to misguided interventions, which elicit protest. This protest in turn elicits accusations of moral corruption. Reddit user Free_the_waffle similarly wrote the following.

One such example is climate change. If you even sound a critical voice there, you are a climate denier and you are morally reprehensible. It is no longer discussed in substance. And gosh, now we have a minister who wants to spend 60(!!!!) billion on climate change and nitrogen and he literally doesn't know what nitrogen is and does. The result of all that morally indignant chatter. Meanwhile, the Dutch are sitting at home in the cold, because they cannot pay their gas bill (u/Fear_the_waffle).

Interviewees often pointed out a perceived discrepancy between the appeal to morality for explaining and motivating policies, and simultaneous disregard for the circumstances of Dutch working class. In their eyes, these policies tended to have negative effects regardless of the proclaimed moral goals guiding them. The general feeling was that disagreement with such policies was faced with moral scrutiny, but that the same moral scrutiny was not afforded to their victims. Furthermore, it was felt that the actual content of the criticism was not taken seriously or listened to.

If a member of parliament from, for example, FVD or PVV asks a question about inflation, the answer is that Baudet and Wilders are racists. I'm exaggerating now, but seriously no one is going into the substantive conversation anymore, but they literally start talking about a tweet in which someone once said something ugly and kill the substantive conversation. That's a really terrible way of reasoning. Especially in politics you sometimes have to be tough and leave the emotion outside your decisions. Because we all know that emotion does not necessarily lead to good decisions (u/Fear_the_waffle).

He thus argues that emotion should be kept outside of political decisions or debate because it prevents productive discussion about the actual issues. Arguments then do not concern the best way of going forward, but which politician or party has the most integrity of character.

In discussing their frustration with 'emotionality' in leftwing politics, what became most apparent from my interlocutors' statements was their frustration with the disproportionate weight given to emotions. This weight was brought on by its often moral connotations, and was, they sometimes felt, intentionally used to silence opponents. This insight was, for me personally, eye-opening. There is in my own eyes a balance to be maintained between rationality and emotion in politics. Yet, I had not considered before how in arenas of debate such as Reddit or even in the Dutch parliament, both arguments, emotionality and rationality (or, rather, morality and practicality), are in essence made to be incommensurable. It becomes impossible to argue about practicalities when they are placed opposite morality - there is such a heavy weight to morality that it results in a discussion that can only be on moral terms. Appeals to practicality will always hold less weight, and discussion is shut down. However, these dynamics aren't true discussion, and they don't produce understanding, and they don't allow people to feel heard, valued or dignified.

Frustration with moral judgment came down to a frustration with repression and forced conformity to some notion of what is deemed an acceptable opinion. This inspired among interviewees an aversion that motivated them to shift away from left-wing politics to spaces less repressive. User Fear_the_waffle was especially outspoken about how moral judgment and moral dignity is tied to censorship. As discussed more fully in the previous chapter, he had explained that if one feels a need for an authority in charge of deciding which information is fit to be distributed, they in essence assume that people are not able to make such choices for themselves. This implies that some people are not seen as having the same moral worth or moral dignity - that they shouldn't follow their own personal compass to form their own ideas of what is right, and should not be allowed to let those decisions weigh in on their political preferences - that their voices are not worth hearing. This,

again, ties into the notion of having to face and defend moral judgment and scrutiny. It is felt that a large share of the political landscape within a country treats them as morally ‘less-than’. These perceptions of being judged as morally lesser and morally repugnant, were a source of feelings of alienation, exclusion and resentment. They made up a rift between different political strands, standing in the way of an experience of a feeling of shared national community.

Blame

Many of the people I spoke to felt that they as a group tend to be directly blamed for much injustice in the world. The notion of blame was decidedly interesting, because it posed a flipside to the narrative most often discussed in academic literature on racism. There is much to explore here, but the core of it was conveyed by Reddit user /According-Control249.

I am the white straight man from an average family, HBO education and now living in a very white village. I live in a world where every group that feels oppressed/disadvantaged (rightly or not, I'm leaving that in the middle) tells in their own way that the group I'm in is the cause of all misery. The more that message is sent, the more I'm inclined to shout that some misery has been brought upon minorities by themselves. My point? Cancel culture pushes me into a dilemma where on the one hand I become aware of behavior that I can probably change, something that would be less likely without such strong coercion, on the other hand it pushes me on the defensive. You can't blame me for all the misery in the world (u/According-Control249).

He was an exception in his willingness to share this so plainly. It was more common for the people I spoke to to be avoidant in their responses. They tended to choose their words carefully to make clear that they were firmly against racism on principle. However, it became clear that the notion of racism itself did not incite reflection. In fact, it most often deterred it. How come that something which is held to be so deeply morally wrong, doesn't inspire people to truly contemplate it? I argue that the answer to this question consists of several parts.

It is important to note that my research population universally and overtly acknowledged that racism is extremely wrong. It seemed that its apparent extremity and intentionality was an important aspect of its conceptualization. When naming an example of a racist, they would most often refer to Hitler or the KKK. However, when asked what marked the line distinguishing racism from non-racism, responses were more ambiguous. This became even more apparent when I asked them to reflect on their own attitudes and opinions, and stances toward controversial topics such as immigration, affirmative action and ethnic profiling. They acknowledged that they tended to be unfairly accused of racism, but tended to avoid discussing their opinions and ideas about minorities in Dutch society altogether, let alone reflect on them. Rather than doing so, they often discussed instead the perception that they tended to be judged by ‘leftists’, and painted as morally corrupt. I said previously that this perception was incredibly important. This was the case both in terms of the importance it held for my interlocutors themselves, and in its consequences. Not only did the people I spoke to feel less inclined to truly discuss with others when they felt morally judged by them, but they were more likely to want to discredit or deny the truth of the lived experience of those who experience racism.

The following sections will discuss how these feelings of being blamed, tied into conceptualizations of racism and into their perceptions of moral judgment to produce circumstances wherein actual racism becomes vague and contested.

The charge of racism

I was initially surprised and a little frustrated when my questions about morality yielded so few direct answers from my participants. It took me quite some time to realize that the people I studied were aware of the strong moral connotations of racism, and tended to avoid the topic altogether. They almost always used 'safe', uncontroversial examples to illustrate their dissatisfaction: they talked about climate change when they meant to display the outrageous left-wing tendency to make 'everything about race'. They talk about diversity quotas as an example of poor left-wing policy, but nearly always named the diversity quota for women. Even more puzzling was that it became more and more clear that my research population genuinely agreed that racism was an inexcusable evil. Yet, they seemed to defend racists; to belittle the oppression experienced by those subject to racism; and to deny that racism was at play at instances where that was the most incontestable fact to me.

The open animosity that I had expected to find toward racialized 'others', was instead geared toward societal 'elites', institutions and the left-wing political spectrum - all of which I represented. It resulted in some interesting conversations, but also necessitated me to be extremely careful in how I approached my research group and how I chose my words throughout all exchanges. I felt continuously that if I wanted my research group to let down their guard and open up to me, I had to be extremely humble and generous, and be forward about all my self-critical reflections. Over my fieldwork, my tactic became to include these even in my initial messages establishing contact.

Many people I spoke to said that racism was often called upon by political dissidents in discussions where it held little or no relevance. The people I talked to easily named examples of instances where they felt that accusations of racism were unfairly invoked. It was seen as an easy shot: an unwarranted accusation typical of political dissidents who wanted to quickly disqualify them and avoid talking about the 'real issues'. They held the idea that racism has nothing to do with whatever societal issue was discussed. For instance, Reddit user /Fear_the_waffle stated the following.

What is happening with racism now is that everything is racism. Seriously, you can actually find serious people who say math is racist. And what happens? Someone says hey, your financial policy is wrong, here you have the mathematical calculation of why you are wrong. And the other party says: mathematics is racism, you are morally reprehensible. And then there's no more substantive discussion, it's all on emotion again (u/Fear_the_waffle).

By saying 'everything is racism' he suggests that the word is used so broadly that it loses its meaning. In his experience it is a weapon for attacking the other party based on their integrity of character. And, once it is invoked, discussion reverts from substantive to emotional, hindering the possibility of truly productive disagreement. An interviewee who asked to remain anonymous, similarly described that she thought racism was too often, and too quickly invoked. She defined racism as follows.

If I say, for example, something about the fact that there are cultural differences between certain groups in the Netherlands, then I can also be called a racist, so there really is a definitive definition of racist - that's difficult. I think it really is the structural exclusion and especially the hating of certain groups.

To her the notion of racism itself called to mind being 'called' racist. Even mentioning the existence of cultural differences between different social groups in her experience might invoke such an accusation. What she said is in line with what most other interviewees said: racism is terrible, and it is an extreme. She recognized that what constitutes racism means different things to different parties. To

her, the most defining feature of this gray area was that some people might call her a racist for statements that she considered not to be. The difference here is best illustrated by an example from another interview. I had asked user /MadeyesNL, who explicitly considers themselves left-wing, what racism is.

You know, you have racism as in uhm, you know, just slavery, and the er, WWII, that sort of thing, that racism. And for your mother to say that children in Africa are hungry - well, in most cities they aren't. That's also kind of racism, turning the metaphor all the way around.

Uh, so you just have very light racism. But they say yes, that's nonsense, you know. Eh, well-known examples when someone once says eh, 'you speak Dutch well' [*imitating someone who speaks excessively clearly*]. That someone with a different skin color is constantly asked 'where are you from?' 'Uh, the Netherlands'. "No, where are you really from?" That you constantly get the feeling that you don't belong (u/MadeyesNL).

He viewed 'lighter' forms of racism ultimately as racism, albeit not always intentional. Intentionality, again, is where much conceptual tension lies. Many of my interlocutors seemed hesitant to even consider such 'lighter' forms of racism. To them, racism existed as something exceedingly terrible and evil. As a product of malignant intent. One exchange under a Reddit post illustrates this clearly.

The post, made by user /Parabellum8Gg, concerns an article by NOS from February of 2022 when political parties in Rotterdam reported to the police regarding racist stickers on party member posters. The stickers had featured texts like 'landverraders', traitors (of the nation), and White Lives Matter, along with a QR code to a website. The article featured a quote by PVDA party member Richard Moti, saying that he is a man of color, and finds this threatening. The top-voted comments in the Reddit discussion do a decidedly good job of illustrating the different standpoints of parties disagreeing with one another on matters of racism, while simultaneously agreeing that racism is serious and inexcusable.

The two disagreeing parties mainly seem to disagree about the phrases on the stickers. One person responds mainly to Moti's quote, and to the notion of White Lives Matter as a racist phrase. They say,

"I am a man of color"

If you say things like this, in my opinion you're done.

So funny that you can make a lot of the left seethe with simply stating that white people matter too. And then you can say, "yes, but this is a dogwhistle for a 360 woman-rape holocaust party," but in the end it doesn't say that. It's a harmless message, and phrased that way on purpose. It just goes to show that these people have a bias against white people.

Different comments voice similar arguments to this. The sentiment is that White Lives Matter in itself should not be called racist, while simultaneously defending the rights of colored people. White lives do matter, it is said, and opposing that holds an inherent contradiction that topples the argument itself. It is hypocritical and can be in itself considered racist. Indeed, some people agree that profiling yourself as 'someone of color' is the same as spreading racism into the world: creating inequality by

'making it about color'. This demonstrates the very dynamic of white innocence discussed by Wekker (2019).

There is another strand of argument here, which holds that White Lives Matter in fact is racist: it is a symbol of ignoring inequality and avoiding discussion about it. One person says,

For alderman Moti, skin color does matter at the moment. Not because he wants it to, but because a bunch of racist fanatics thought it was necessary to make a problem of his skin color.

And many people on the left do indeed distinguish by color in a strange way. But this is done in recognition of the fact that unfortunately people are still not treated equally. Skin color shouldn't really matter, but unfortunately it still does. In any case, people on the left want to try to change this, even if it sometimes happens in a very naive and uncomfortable way. People who claim to see no color are ignoring the problems that unfortunately still exist.

Edit: Just to be clear, if you still don't want to accept it. The qr code on the sticker leads to this telegram group.

At the end of the post, they made an edit. This edited message was what set apart the third line of argument. Namely, the stickers had also featured a QR code leading to a website to a White Lives Matter telegram group, which is in fact outspokenly racist. A few people called attention to this.

The name is not very shocking at first glance, but if you google the movement behind it you will soon find out that this is an international movement that in the US falls under the 'white supremacy' movement, skinheads and the KKK. Since I learned that I can agree that this is considered racist.

I know very little about the group from Rotterdam, but I can imagine what it entails.

I personally believe that anyone can be just as racist as any other person. I can remember seeing a report with an interview with a super racist person who was born blind.

This, almost every time, seemed to shut down discourse on whether White Lives Matter is a racist movement. When faced with the fact that the group distributing the stickers was racist, everybody in the comment section came to the same conclusion - even those who had at first avidly argued that White Lives Matter was not racist, and that in fact disapproving of the phrase was racist itself. However, this didn't always mean that they changed their minds regarding the phrase White Lives Matter and what it represented. This is demonstrated by the following comment.

After doing some more research of my own, I indeed conclude that the movement is extreme.

However, this is not how the NOS brings it. They bring the news in such a way that all the stamps of racism would be given only by the terms White lives matter and traitors. Bad journalism in this case, but by now you are used to it from the NOS.

The user firstly admits that the movement was indeed 'extreme'. Then, they argue that NOS, the main public news broadcaster in the Netherlands, was in fact to be blamed for the misunderstanding. It was reported in a leading way that did an insufficient job of conveying the fact that this concerned 'actual' racism, and not their supposed usual overstated, distorted reporting, invoking racism where there is none. The same person later says,

(...) People find it hypocritical and incorrect that terms such as White Lives Matter and traitors are portrayed as racism, which the article also does. That in itself has 0.0 to do with the WLM movement. (...) most of the parties discussed here have a history of describing people and parties as 'racist'. When parties such as DENK and GroenLinks say this, you know that 99% of the time you don't have to take them seriously. They owe that to themselves. This article is just that one percent.

There is no one here, at least not as far as I can read and certainly not the sentiment of the sub defending a movement like WLM per se.

He distinguishes here between the phrase White Lives Matter, and the racist movement operating under the name. Only the latter he considers to be racist. To him, racism tends to be invoked at times when he does not consider it warranted or relevant, usually as an accusation. This makes apparent how people within different movements conceptualize the term differently. The case described here illustrates how people only conceptually agree with one another when discussing racism in terms of an actual case of an extremist group outwardly claiming to be racist.

My interlocutors didn't just not see these things as racism: they didn't want to. The people I talked to were hesitant to discuss their true attitudes regarding racism or discrimination toward minority groups in Dutch society. They were aware of the racist connotations of certain topics. For instance, in naming examples to illustrate their disagreement with left-wing policies, interviewees tended to steer clear of race, instead opting to talk about less controversial things. When I asked them directly about discrimination within society, they chose their words carefully. This is demonstrated by the following excerpt of an interview with /no_K3tchup. I had asked him for his ideas about inequality of opportunity among people of different backgrounds, and he said the following.

Um, yeah... Yeah that's always a tricky one. Because um, look, discrimination is of course illegal. I'm sure it does- Eh, I think. I don't know. But I assume that it does happen, discrimination. At the very least- inequality of opportunity, you're talking about discrimination in general, right? And of course lower school advices and things like that. Yes, that happens, but I also think that there are often, that maybe there are also... Yes, how do you say that? Yes, I recognize that problem, but the solutions therein probably we differ in opinion. (...) I'm very much against quotas. You know, diversity quotas, women's quotas, that sort of thing. And that's more because I'm see people as individuals, and in essence you're just discriminating with quotas. (...) As a man, you are rejected because you are a man, while, what can you do about it that the others are also men, you know, they are already there. Can't do anything about it. Plus I don't give a fuck what skin color someone has and what gender they are if they want to work somewhere. That's not even an afterthought. But it shouldn't be the main thing at all (u/no_K3tchup).

From a question about inequality in Dutch society, he went from an acknowledgment that discrimination exists, to the inherent discriminatory practice of diversity quota. Again, the government imposition seemed to play a role. He opposed affirmative action because it forcibly sets back one group's chances of getting hired based on a characteristic that should not matter. However, later on I mentioned that studies have found quite some evidence of discrimination in hiring procedures. This invoked a different response.

Yes, no that... Yes, yes yes. But uh, then you can of course also ask yourself, why is that? And that is discrimination, of course I admit that. That is discrimination. But uh, now I'm going to say something that's not very nice, but [*laughs*] but uh, look, if you hire a kid from Amsterdam Nieuw-West for something, the chance is probably greater that he causes problems than when you dat Jan-Johan so-and-so [typical Dutch names], you know what I mean? And that might just be the experience of such an employer. I don't know, but... (u/no_K3tchup).

He corroborated his point with a personal anecdote about a Kamper, a term for a poor, white Dutch person stereotypically living in a trailer camp, who had worked for his previous employer and had misbehaved terribly on the job. It stood out to me that he decided upon an anecdote which completely omitted race from the equation, as we had spent the previous few minutes talking about racial discrimination in hiring procedures. The point here, however, was that stereotypes were stereotypes for a reason.

Now I don't want to justify discrimination. I mean, hey, of course Kampers should also have a job, but, well, let's say there's something else going on. And of course, positive discrimination can be a solution, but um, yes I think you should just treat people as individuals, and trying to solve discrimination with more discrimination, that's not what I believe in (u/no_K3tchup).

I asked one interviewee, user /T1b3rium, how she would conceptualize racism or discrimination. She said the following.

I will not deny that racism/discrimination exists. There are simply people who see something other than their own skin color and can't deal with that. Why, I don't really understand. Despite meeting some hardcore racists. In my experience it doesn't get any further than a bad experience on which the rest is written off, combined with the less fine statistics for, for example, Moroccan youth and crime (u/T1b3rium).

(...) Especially young men with a Middle Eastern background have a bad reputation. It does not come about magically. They appear too much in the bad statistics. Then you are 10-0 behind, even if you do your best. That's unfair, but I'm afraid it's almost inevitable. If you want to change this, enough individuals in the group (together or separately) will have to stand up to actively counter that stereotype, but that also means that society gives them a fair chance (u/T1b3rium).

She, like user According-Control249, was quite distinguished by her willingness to engage in self-criticism in the context of racism. In regard to her own actions regarding racism, she said,

As for myself, I prefer to judge as much as possible on the merits of the person, that is what you have influence on. Not your skin color. but if I'm honest I also judge outside those merits. If I'm walking down the street and I see a group of loiterers, I avoid them. I judge purely on appearance and my own prejudices. For all I know they are very friendly loitering youths. But loiterers simply don't have a good reputation, so I avoid them. I don't give them a chance to improve (u/T1b3rium).

I asked her why she believed racism was such a difficult, painful topic for those who don't truly experience it.

I think it's a hot iron because people feel effaced by it. 'Look how bad this group has it'. While the other then thinks 'what about me? I live on 50 euros a week and can't pay my rent' (...) (u/T1b3rium).

Later she echoed the same sentiment articulated by user According-Control249, saying that the hating of white men essentially constitutes discrimination, and contributes to the problem of racism itself.

You yourself mentioned the glorious moral superiority of the left. I'm going to summarize that briefly as woke. It is nice and woke to despise white men. In the end it just comes down to discrimination. But actually, if you look at the group of white men, the number [*of white men*] at the absolute top compared to the number of white men [*in total*] is quite small. In addition, there is quite a lot of poverty among white men (just like any population group) while the poor white men are lumped together with the rich white men. I can understand that poor white men don't really appreciate that and act against it (u/T1b3rium).

The interviewee who asked to stay anonymous articulated a similar view on the exclusion of the 'standard white man'.

If a problem concerns you... Then I understand you have more to say about it, want to say something about it. For example, someone who has experienced racism and discrimination, of course then they can say more. But I also think you can't exclude a standard white man from the conversation. Because you are a society after all. You have to work it out together. And if you actually keep people away from that conference table, I think you will only get more problems in the long run.

The experience of being white and poor combined with being morally judged, is a narrative that sounds familiar. The idea that racism is sometimes projected by richer social strata onto the poor working class to signal their moral failure, and to create social distance to them, has previously been elaborated by Çankaya and Mepschen (2019). This connection between being a poor, white, working-class person, and being seen as somehow morally unworthy of being heard, is something that was also expressed by my interviews. It is something that should not be taken lightly.

I asked one interviewee whether she would say that FVD frontman Thierry Baudet could be considered racist. In previous years there had been quite a media storm around a number of Whatsapp messages, tweets and statements of Baudet, all of which pointed, to my own conviction, to racism. We saw this differently. She told me she couldn't confidently say he was, as the media frame information in distortive ways.

I don't know to what extent he really - he makes statements that just aren't always handy. But I should actually talk to Thierry Baudet in order to really form a picture of what he actually thinks, without editing from his side or from another angle in the media. Uh, I don't think that's fair to him, although I'll never meet him. I think that I can only form an actual picture of someone and say whether he is racist or not, based on real conversations with him without intervention, so to speak.

This became more clear when I said that I sometimes came across quotes of things he had said, and found them quite shocking. She answered,

Sure, I've seen those quotes too. But then I always try to think a little bit that there is always a certain context. And even if I don't agree with those quotes, I might myself resent them, I think yes, but still... You could say they are racist comments, but is he actually racist as a person? That is the question.

I asked her what the difference is, and she said,

Look, to a certain extent racism is of course a fact, but on the other hand it is also a matter of feeling. Because from when – there's quite a gray area – same thing with discrimination, there's quite a gray area of okay, that's clearly discrimination, if you're not hired because you're male or female, black or white. But you also have those, uh, border areas, I think. And I think the same with racist remarks, some might be really racist also out of context, but others- er yes might sound very- this is really not a popular opinion, but some things you have to see in context before you can really consider, gosh, is that actually racist? Or from what angle - who quoted it like that? And then you might need to do more research on that before you say okay, that may or may not be racist. Even if that sounds very harsh. Although I am of course strongly against it.

She implied that it is important to hold off on accusations of racism instead of falsely assuming someone to be racist. Previously the interviewee mentioned the existence of a 'gray area' where she might be accused of racism unwarrantedly.

Falsely being accused of racism was something she related to on a personal level. She was the same interviewee that, on the grounds of being of visibly non-Western descent, had been told that she ought to be in favor of diversity quota. She had experienced this as judgmental and hypocritical, referring to it as an excessively emotional response to a situation to something that required realism. Here, she is hesitant to discuss whether Thierry Baudet is racist, as racism constitutes a matter of feeling. She enunciated clearly that she was 'strongly against' it, but also acknowledged that circumstantial factors should be assessed before something can be judged as racist. She distinguishes between an 'actual' racist, and a person who is 'called' racist. To her, this is an important distinction, deciding essentially whether someone fulfills the criteria of a racist.

This is where the element of intentionality comes into play. The focus was not on the experience of racism, but on the intentionality behind racism. Intent is seemingly required before we can safely judge that the word racism warranted. Accusations of racism are experienced as invalidating and degrading: the product of a morally superior attitude seen as a typical feature of the political left. People were intrinsically opposed to reflecting on the notion of racism itself.

This is how racism is seen as evil, and simultaneously conceptualized in a way that defies self-reflection. After all, to be a racist, you would have to be intentionally so. You would need to be a KKK member or a leader set on consciously and systematically exterminating a population group. Since you're none of those things, you're automatically not racist, and any accusation of racism is met by closing off and engaging in strong denial. You might say it is simply an easy, unfairly invoked weapon to quickly shut down diverging opinions, exude moral superiority and simultaneously not have to be subjected to scrutiny regarding your own attitudes and opinions.

Conclusion

My research group shared a conviction that an elite within society sees itself as more morally worthy or morally dignified than others, and uses their power to the detriment of the powerless. This moral elite was deemed to view others as morally unfit to make their own choices and form their own opinions should they have access to unfiltered and uncensored information; and unworthy of having their voices and concerns be heard. This elite constituted politicians, the higher-educated, and the entirety of the political Left. This experience of being morally judged was, in my personal experience, grounded: I have over the course of my research come to terms with the fact that I myself have cast a great deal of moral judgment, albeit not with bad intentions.

The concept of racism immediately called to mind moral judgment. Racism was seen as the ultimate offense and the ultimate evil, but required both extremity and intentionality to qualify as such. It was considered an easy accusation for which my interlocutors tended to face undue blame. It is this undue blame, combined with a sense of devaluation of their own morality, experience and circumstances, which in turn incites resentment towards those who do face racism. Racism is the topic of much political disagreement. My findings suggest that at least some of this disagreement arises from differing conceptualizations of racism. Strong connotations of moral judgment made people unwilling to truly engage in meaningful discussion with each other. This makes room for conceptual vagueness regarding racism itself; and unwillingness to listen and compromise.

In the following chapter, I will further explore how this conceptual unclarity and the feeling of being unfairly accused of racism, might make space for actual racism to fly under the radar, defended by the same people who consider racism to be the ultimate evil. I will furthermore explore how these sentiments might be tactically used, and combined into a populist narrative that challenged the legitimacy of democracy and questioned the nature of reality itself.

Forum voor Democratie

Introduction

When I initially began my research into morality in the political far right, I had considered the voting population of the Dutch political party Forum voor Democratie, or FVD, a fitting research site. The party has known its share of controversy in its short existence, and was quite infamous in my social circles. This infamousness initially sparked my interest. Although I knew that something within the party rhetoric must resonate with its followers, I had expected them to acknowledge the party's image for what it is, and for what it tells us. Even more so, because the party itself does not deny its proneness to controversy. Rather, it embraces it. Thierry Baudet, the party's frontman, called it a conscious tactic, bent on breaking and unmasking taboos, and expanding the discursive frame of politics (Baudet 2021).

Before attending two political rallies as part of my fieldwork, I had only passively heard about the party in the news, and had a vague understanding of the articles shared on the Forum_democracy subreddit and the types of comments posted below, and the manner in which people defended the party. I had gotten a glimpse of how extreme-right narratives were explained and defended in the context of online discussion arenas, and directly to me as a political adversary. However, I was at a loss regarding how these ideas were given meaning within circles of like minded people, or by political party members themselves. Thus, I decided to attend two FVD campaign rallies as part of their campaign for the 2022 municipal elections. They were open for anyone to attend, even for people who did not yet support FVD. I bought tickets for two separate events, one on Monday on the 7th of March, and one on Friday on the 11th.

I wanted to delve deeper into the question of how morality ties into both the narrative of FVD as a far-right populist party, and into what attracts its followers to this narrative. I was surprised to find that how I as an outsider had understood Forum voor Democratie and what it stood for, was almost unrecognizable from the way the people I spoke to explained it. This became increasingly clear to me throughout both the events and the conversations I had there. Having often come across discussion threads where FVD's scandals were defended by its supporters, I believed its reputation was universally acknowledged. I believe the frequent surfacing of racist and antisemitic expressions by party members and communities, were as clear and as undisputable for them, as they were for me. I believed the party to proudly wear its infamous reputation, and I had initially gone into the field expecting for my own image of FVD to be unanimously held as true. I was stumped, however, to find that the way my interlocutors described and explained the party, was completely different from how I personally saw it.

What is more, I began to see a pattern. I had learned over the course of my fieldwork that people were attracted to the narrative of FVD for different reasons. However, I realized that the party had attuned itself perfectly to what I had learned, and had combined all these different stances into a narrative that seemingly convinces and represents all. It seemed interested in creating a sense of belonging and shared social identity. The narrative validated every perceived lack, every perceived injustice, every feeling, every threat, every point of dissatisfaction that emerged from my fieldwork. It combined attitudes toward societal issues, with unfulfilled emotional and social needs, with frustrations with forced conformity and censorship. Then, it actively asserted that the members of this group were at home nowhere else within Dutch society except with each other.

The following paragraphs will discuss both a short history of FVD and the types of news items that solidified my image of it. The rest of the chapter will focus on the way the narratives told by the party leader, party members and voters diverged from this. I will shed a light on this discrepancy, and argue that perceptions of being morally judged and condemned by the political left

are pull factors to, and elements of, a grander narrative which both defends and maintains racism, and forms a direct threat to democracy as a whole.

Forum voor Democratie on the rise

At its onset, FVD had been considered quite uncontroversial. FVD was established in 2015 (Ornstein s.a.), initially, not as a political party but a ‘think tank’, erected in the months before a citizens’ referendum regarding Ukraine’s admission to the European Union. The outcome of the referendum, a majority vote contrary to the proposition, was not taken into account by the sitting government, leading Baudet to turn FVD into a political party in 2016. The party had profiled itself back then mainly on the grounds of its EU-critical stance and its valuation of sovereignty and citizen participation.

However, FVD also had a strong, opposing stance on the subject of migration. After the 2017 elections, the party garnered social media attention over Baudet’s closing speech, which had had distinctly racist connotations (Ornstein s.a.). In a statement by the party itself, these accusations are painted as mere annoyances, preventing them from focusing on the agenda items they truly find important (Forum voor Democratie 2019). Furthermore, although it is popular within the Dutch extreme-right sphere, the party denies its flirtation with extreme right ideas (Mebius 2020). Yet its members have ever since continued regularly making headlines for recurrent emergences of racist Whatsapp messages (Elsevier 2021); hints of antisemitism, such as their promotion of antisemitic Twitter accounts (Lucassen and Wallet 2021); and having in-person meetings with extreme-right thinkers such as Jared Taylor (Kieskamp 2017).

FVD was deemed the great winner in the provincial council elections of 2019 (NOS 2019). This was especially notable since the party was at that point a newcomer to the Dutch political sphere. Their win was largely attributed to the fact that climate change was a hot topic during elections (which FVD had an especially strong, dismissive stance on) and to an attack which had shaken the Dutch nation: a radicalized Muslim man had pulled a gun on a tram in Utrecht, and killed four people and wounded six (NOS 2019; Tieleman & Koop 2020). The attacker had professed that the attack was one on all of Dutch society, in the name of the Islam (Tieleman & Koop 2020). It had taken place in the same week as the elections, putting migration at the center of the public agenda (NOS: 2019).

Although it hasn’t existed for long, the party has been through a hefty share of infighting, party splits and course-corrections. In November of 2020, FVD was in the midst of a controversy regarding racist and nazi-sympathizing utterances on the part of its youth group, Jong FVD (JFVD), which became public and spurred national outrage (NOS 2020). At first, Baudet had resigned along with several other party members, but later that week re-entered the party. This proved to be a point of controversy itself for FVD members, as other party members quite literally denied Baudet access - the locks to the FVD building had been changed and Baudet was initially not allowed a key. Also he was unable to access the party’s digital space or social media accounts. All this occurred against a backdrop of a whirling (social) media storm (NOS 2020).

At the time of writing, FVD has distinguished itself within the population by taking a strong stance on the Dutch government’s freedom-impeding COVID-19 measures and its vaccination campaign. It had placed it within a frame of excessive control and inequality. The narrative of resistance to the governmental measures corresponds to the anti-establishment sentiments considered a characteristic of populist parties, so it is perhaps not so strange that it was precisely the party FVD which became popular among those dissatisfied with the Dutch governments’ actions. The party seemed able to say all the right things to the frustrated masses, and has profiled itself as a party welcoming to those who believe in conspiracy theories. This for instance was exemplified by Thierry Baudet’s multifold presence at demonstrations against the governmental measures, and fixation on

conspiracy theories. In 2021, half of FVD's voters thought the pandemic was a conspiracy (Volkskrant 2021). Although this choice is in some ways tactically beneficial, as it allowed the party to attract a voting population with similarly strong affiliation with this narrative, it has also driven a wedge within the party as some people are hesitant to the idea of being associated with those who believe in conspiracy theories (Haenen 2021). In an interview, party member Theo Hiddema critically discussed the party platform shift from its previous focus on issues like asylum, democracy and the nation state, to a new focus on what he calls proclaiming how people should deal with the Holocaust, what to do about satanic, ritual child molestation or the world-wide Corona conspiracy (Haenen 2021).

March 7th: FVD Café Utrecht

Attending the first event turned out to be somewhat more complicated than I had anticipated. The event on Monday had been dubbed an 'FVD café' in Utrecht. I had bought tickets days ahead of the event, and had sent the event organizers an email notifying them of my researcher status, asking them to let me know should my presence be unwanted. I never received a reply. The event page itself stated that the location would be announced two days in advance, but when Monday rolled around there was still no location. At 4:00 PM I ended up calling the Forum voor Democratie head office while waiting on my train to Utrecht. It was rush hour and I stood in the crowd, phone to my ear, as my call was transferred from one person to the other. By the time I stepped onto my train I'd finally gotten someone on the phone who looked up my email address in their system and then gave me the location along with the promise that I'd receive an email too. I was lucky to call when I did, because when I called the number again an hour later it turned out that the head office had already closed. I received the email almost immediately after our call. It was short, saying only the following.

A message from Forum for Democracy:

Dear visitors,

The address for tomorrow is:

Oudegracht at werf 145 in Utrecht.

See you tonight!

I noted that, while the email itself talked about an address for 'tomorrow', it ended by saying 'see you tonight'.

The event turned out to be held inside a pub down by the canal. There were no posters or signs anywhere, and as we descended the steps from the street level down, we at first doubted whether we were in the right place. Several people in their forties and fifties - mostly men, one woman - were standing at the door. They were talking to each other light-heartedly. When they noticed us they smiled, asking, "Forum voor Democratie?"

It was nothing, looking back, but it served as a moment of realization that caught me off guard. I briefly considered whether to immediately make clear that I was there as a 'tourist', or to pretend to be part of the group. My nervousity was not a good counselor, however, and I ended up aiming for a mix of the two, likely not successfully projecting either. Nevertheless I managed to answer yes, and one of the men opened the door for us. We entered a narrow, elongated restaurant. The ambiance should have felt familiar: it was warm, there was the sound of chatter and laughter, it smelled like beer. That's perhaps why it felt even more strange: it was a weird contradiction to my own discomfort. Although I could objectively see that the space was cozy and intimate (lots of wood, large decorative beer barrels, colorful strings of light) I was unable to settle into it.

To the right of the entrance was a table with FVD merchandise: I saw a stack of white cloth banners with Forum voor Democratie printed on them in black. There were other things laid out, but I was too uncomfortable to let myself look around too conspicuously. I was mainly preoccupied with keeping myself under control. It was tense. I told myself it was okay to be tense.

My impression of the crowd was that there were several distinct groups present. I mainly made this deduction based on their age categories, styles of dress, their manner of engaging with one another and taking up space. The audience seemed to be a combination of young men in their 20s and 30s, and older men and women in their 40s and 50s. The majority fell into the latter group. There were some patterns in people's clothing styles and in the way they carried themselves and engaged with one another. Among the younger men, there was a group which seemed to dress to purposefully project an image of success: I might describe them as stereotypical hockey club members. They wore their hair neatly gelled back or to the side, and their blouses were neatly ironed. They stood out as a distinct group precisely because of their fairly similar styles of dress. Then, there was another group among the young men, who seemed to vary a bit more in clothing styles and also seemed to gravitate less toward each other. They were not unkempt per se, but they stood out against the ironed-blouse men. They generally had longer hair, often without gel, some in ponytails. Their clothes were a little less 'coded', and they seemed to carry themselves less confidently.

Among the older group there were women present, but they were far outnumbered by the men. They did not necessarily resemble each other in a way I could pinpoint, but nevertheless struck me as somewhat similar to one another. In my estimation, this perceived sameness was due to their way of occupying space and actively seeking contact and connecting with each other: it was obvious that they *felt* like they were part of a group. That was the impression I got: one of community and like-mindedness.

My friend and I noticed that people often curiously sought eye contact with us. They would be in conversation with each other, and yet sometimes take breaks in talking seemingly just to look at us, encouraging us to jump in. I noticed this and I felt how many opportunities there were to make contact and strike up a conversation, each of which I let slip through my fingers. I was so very aware of my own discomfort. "No, I'm not like you", I wanted to say, "don't bother". People were happy to be there, with each other. Happy to talk to each other. Happy to have this sense of community. Yet I strongly felt that I was not part of that community. I was an intruder.

Perhaps those feelings were what prompted me to strike up a conversation with a lady of some 50 or 60 years of age sitting alone at a table in a wooden enclave. My friend and I had gotten two tokens upon entering the pub which I'd just exchanged for two beers, and I was happy to get out of the crowd for a while. I asked the woman if it was okay if we sat with her, and she said yes. She spoke softly, and it was difficult to understand her over the talking and laughter. She wore no make-up and had on a practical coat and a sweater. Her body language was subdued, and as were her facial expressions when we talked to her. She was very friendly. I asked her how she fell in with FVD, and she told us that she used to work on a farm and hadn't been very interested in politics, but since the start of the pandemic she had started noticing that there was very little space to voice alternative thoughts and ideas within society and within politics. She considered party leader Thierry Baudet to be smart and educated. It was obvious that she admired those things about him. She asked us how we had come in contact with FVD, and I told her that I don't vote for Forum myself, but was present as a researcher. I couldn't really tell from her reaction what she thought about that.

Later, the woman told us about a meeting in Utrecht months before, where she said demonstrators of Extinction Rebellion had stood by the entrance with banners with 'Go away Nazis' on them. When she had asked the demonstrators ("young girls") what the point was, that she is not a Nazi, she said that the girls had looked doubtful, seemingly startled. Then she heard who she thought

was their 'leader' tell the protesters "these are all racists". The woman looked at us, saying, "A Nazi is something very bad. I am not a Nazi."

I asked her how she thought those connotations came about, and she answered that she didn't know. She said that she believed the reputation of FVD to be unwarranted and plain wrong. "If you want to help the climate, and if you are against racism and discrimination, then you should go to Forum [voor Democratie]." She was very much aware that FVD had a rather negative reputation, but she said not all of society was so set against it. It was mostly an elite that opposed them so much, she said, and this elite even made an active effort both to incite dislike of FVD voters, and to make them feel hated. She told us that she had heard that people were being paid to spread defamatory information about Forum and its followers. I asked her who was spreading those things, to which she said, "just 'studentjes' [students]".

Then the first speaker began his talk: George Woodham, party leader for FVD Utrecht. For my friend, who is not very familiar with Dutch politics, the speech seemed to jump from one topic to another, without much apparent relation. For me, after having spent the past few months familiarizing myself with the narratives and rhetoric commonly held by my interlocutors, the speech seemed to tick all the boxes. It mentioned everything I knew to have attracted people to FVD: their EU-critical stance; a desire for a space welcome to conspiracy theories and conspiracy theorists; a frustration with political correctness. At one point he explicitly said that people from 'other ethnic backgrounds' were also frequently part of their group of supporters. It seemed as if Woodham's way of talking to the crowd was a way of creating a sense of community and building bridges between the various issues that had attracted different people to the party. To connect all these topics, and all these voters with different interests, to one another in a common narrative. He seemed to be speaking to people who didn't feel heard, people who didn't feel taken seriously, and who weren't allowed to speak out. His manner of speech and choices of words seemed to boost the group feeling and group energy, and then focus it on the image of an enemy.

This enemy image is very familiar from what I learned from my ethnography on Reddit. It firstly constituted 'the leftists' who hate FVD voters, see them as bad and morally corrupt, and who ridicule their ideas (which are different and deviate from 'the mainstream picture') and ridicule their beliefs in conspiracies. This idea of a supposedly morally superior left-wing was an exceptionally strong theme in his speech. He often mentioned the leftist preoccupation with morals and with deciding who and what is 'good'. It was blatantly mocked, painted as the picture of arrogance and as both ironic and hypocritical since much of this esteemed 'morality' seemed to focus disproportionately on immigrants rather than the fates of the Dutch. He referred to this tendency as one of 'preaching morality'. As empty words. Secondly, he invoked, again, the notion of an elite social group acting as if they are better than others, but simultaneously lazy and not living by their ideals. He explicitly used the term elite throughout his speech. He talked of politicians who do not listen to 'us'. Those who have all the power but use it in ways that 'the people' don't want, and that only serve to inconvenience them. In the speech, the group was told that they were actively being disadvantaged, and that the elite made the wrong decisions based on a black-and-white view of the world that does not reflect reality, but that the people in the room did understand what was going on. They saw the nuance. They understood how the world really works. What was really important. They saw through the haze of taboo. They saw the moral indignation from other politicians for what it was: little more than politically correct theater that does not substantially contribute anything, and is at a loss for any arguments except for "this is wrong".

I had entered the pub with a share of expectations and assumptions. I had acknowledged those upfront and told myself to be curious, but to also prepare myself for the worst, thinking that that way whatever I ended up hearing and experiencing could only be an improvement. However, I was surprised to find that none of the topics I had expected to come up - overt racism and islamophobia,

overt anti-Semitism, disinformation about the climate crisis - were discussed. Most of the speech concerned issues largely uncontroversial to those present. That the Netherlands should leave the EU and that conspiracy thinking was unwelcome in society. The speech discussed in plain language only those topics that had brought most people to Forum - including the people I had interviewed so far. The topics that had informed my research question on the subject of moral logic, were strikingly absent.

Hints of implicit racism were definitely there. In Woodham's speech, he talked about the "Judases" who had leaked messages that disrupted the party two years ago. Instead of calling out the actual racist and anti-Semitic messages that had led these dissenters to leave and denounce the party (about which not a word was said), this choice of words was a clear judgment: whistle-blowing became a 'betrayal' of the group. This also seemed to be a way of uniting people, and perhaps of extending this group feeling to the racist statements and ideas conveyed within the messages. Additionally, Woodham's speech frequently hinted at transphobia. He twice mockingly talked about the left-wing preoccupation with 'not knowing if you're a boy or a girl', or that left-wing politicians like to put money towards 'sports places for transsexuals' or 'rainbow bike paths'. I do have to admit those sounded like rather nice ideas to me.

What stood out to me in Woodham's speech was his conscious effort to relate to those in the crowd. He shared personal stories with an obvious attempt to be humorous and light-hearted. He often stopped to ask the crowd, "Have you ever had that happen?", and made an effort to convey that not only was he one of them, but he saw them and understood them. He often said things in a 'frank' manner, and made dramatic pauses and used repetitive phrases for emphasis. He talked about those who support FVD not just as people with common societal goals, but with common lived experiences. "People who get it", "people with common sense," who, according to him, "see that something has to change here, and not as the lefties ['linksies'] want it, driving us even farther into the abyss, but it has to be straightened out here." He also often complimented the people in the room, saying that he admired what they had accomplished, "without nagging", with "the true FVD mentality". He said, at one point, "we have to take it back, using our common sense, our horse sense [boerenverstand]. We have to take back the country, we have to take back the city, we have to take it all back. They want to take it away from us. They are taking everything away from us." The notions of 'us' versus 'them' were expressly pronounced and unsubtle, and recurred throughout the speech.

I should note that the effort put in by Woodham to say the right things in the right ways, might have worked against him. From my personal view he came across throughout the speech as rather unnatural and ingenuine. He seemed to play a role that did not fit him. His jokes often fell flat, and his language seemed to summarize the feelings within the crowd, but did not incite a true response otherwise. This became obvious especially when contrasted against the speech of Pepijn van Houwelingen: the second speaker of the evening.

Van Houwelingen joined FVD in 2019, shortly after Baudet's previous co-leader Henk Otten was dismissed. Van Houwelingen is known for his strongly opposing stance to globalization and to the European Union, and recently for asserting during a parliamentary debate that a politician from the party D66 would one day be judged in front of a tribunal over his support for what he called an 'apartheidspas', apartheid card, for a pandemic measure (Hermetet & de Jong 2021; NOS 2021). Both speeches articulated largely the same ideas and rhetoric. However, Woodham's style of speaking, choice of words and lack of tact and charm had made it easy to pinpoint what he wanted the crowd to feel and think. He had not been so adept at factually evoking those feelings. Van Houwelingen, was much more subtle. He excited and kindled the crowd, and was so convincing that I sometimes forgot what he was talking about for all the energy around me. Where Woodham had made use of mostly laymans' terms, and had seemed preoccupied with conveying that he was a man of the people, van

Houwelingen used academic terms that made clear that he was intelligent and well-educated. He exuded confidence.

It was a change that clearly altered the feeling in the audience. During Woodham's speech, there had been a continuous murmur of small talk from those around me. Everybody listened to van Houwelingen. All sounds from within the crowd were those of excitement and agreement. The new energy was almost tangible. I experienced firsthand what it can be like when a group is made to feel both disadvantaged and capable, both humble and dignified. Both mocked and abreast of truths no one else can see. To feel the electricity that occurs people truly believe to be part of something great. It was good, and perhaps that much more dangerous and insidious because of it.

When the speeches were over, my friend and I sat down again with the woman we spoke to. This time there was another man at the table. They were engaged in a discussion about conspiracy theories. The man said that he often took part in demonstrations, and told us stories of being attacked, being beaten by the police, and of being aware that people commonly spoke of people like him hatefully: "They say things like, those wappies must die". A thing of note on the term 'wappie' here: it is a mock name that has over the past few years become more common in Dutch public spheres, denoting a 'crazy person' who believes in conspiracy theories. Throughout the evening *wappie* was referenced as a derogatory term and a hurtful accusation. Yet, I noted that the term was often used like this by people who themselves admitted believing in conspiracies. They would acknowledge it as a hurtful term, and moments later use it to describe themselves and others.

In regard to their explanations of the conspiracy theories themselves, it was striking that their core plots were not hostile at all. I had associated belief in conspiracy theories with feelings of distrust, fear and animosity, with videos in which frankly unacceptable things were shouted at politicians, and with a general threat to our national safety. Yet here I sat around a table with people who genuinely believed that bad-intentioned rich people have secret plans of which everyone should be warned, and that there is a network of pedophiles active around the world who secretly kidnap children. Even in their beliefs in conspiracy theories, they had their limits. The man said to believe that 'Q' is not real. He used Q as an abbreviation for the worldwide famous conspiracy theory QAnon (Roose: 2021).

Both the woman and man struck me as having their hearts in the right place. They did not seem to mind that we weren't FVD voters ourselves. The woman said she really enjoyed talking to us. I told her I found it difficult to hear how 'people like me' are perceived. She immediately said: "No, but that's not about you! The left-wing people are not the problem, but the people in power." She seemed very sincere and concerned. I said, "I don't think people get out of bed in the morning intending to make others feel bad." The woman, with a smile, agreed, "No".

At a certain point, I told them that I understood that the idea of not being allowed to speak out, that you are not welcome must feel terrible, and that it must be nice to find a group that welcomes you this way. The woman agreed, "I would never have come to Forum [voor Democratie] otherwise, but in other places you are not allowed to ask questions."

Both the woman and the man consented to me using our discussion in my research. We left soon after. The evening had demonstrated both the importance of community feeling within this group, and the way it was actively created and promoted. I had learned invaluable things. I learned that to those present, the FVD constituted an ingroup. The evening seemed to be especially designed for the fostering and facilitation of feelings of community within the group of FVD supporters. By the speakers, this ingroup was painted as a distinct social identity and a compliment to their character, and contrasted against an outgroup made up of an ingenuine, morally superior left-wing, and a malignant, insidious elite.

I had had a certain impression of Forum voor Democratie as a political party with distinct and pronounced racist motives. However, this impression was completely different from the way it was

explained by either of the people I spoke to, or either of the party members who had spoken during the event. Instead of racism, xenophobia or anti-semitism, the narrative centralized notions of frustration, inequality, exclusion, and of being misunderstood and silenced by those in power. There had been a degree of intentionality behind the narrative, the word choices and nonverbal communication that unsettled me. Over the previous months I had learned about the perceived lacks and injustices my research group experienced. The speeches had both validated those feelings and blamed them on an abstract group of 'leftists elite'. And the people I spoke to had indeed, in the words of user /No_K3tchup. wanted as many people as possible to have a good life. There was in their experience a bad-intentioned elite in Dutch society. They did not see us as falling into that category. They had painted FVD as undeserving of its criticism, and denied and explained away these points of critique. Contradictorily, however, she had admitted that the female supporter likely would not have supported FVD if it wasn't the only space where she felt her ideas and convictions were welcome. These two accounts are not enough to draw conclusions about the entire following of FVD, but they do shed a light on the way some people might explain and justify both FVD's narrative and their support of it, simultaneously opposing key aspects of what makes it amoral in the eyes of its critics. The experience had altogether been both enlightening and unsettling, and transformative of the ways in which I started to understand the implications of my research.

March 11th: The FVD Theater Tour Tilburg

On Friday, at half past 7 in the evening, another friend and I left by bike to go to the van der Valk hotel in Tilburg. Whereas the event on Monday had been a café, tonight's event was described online as a 'theater tour'. The promotional picture had featured a lineup of all FVD party leaders, including Baudet himself. We had no idea what to expect of it otherwise. I wore the same clothes that I wore last Monday: a neat white blouse, black trousers, black boots, and my green cloak. My friend and I had discussed beforehand how to dress and conduct ourselves: would we try to fit in, and dress the way we thought they might dress? We had finally decided not to: if we tried to blend in, we might end up not being authentic. It would be more uncomfortable, which might radiate off us. Finally, we agreed to dress in clothes in which we felt comfortable to simply be ourselves. For me that meant wearing more formal clothes in which I felt confident, and for my friend that meant wearing jeans, sneakers (with the laces untied, very hip apparently) and a faded hoodie. I'm adding these details to illustrate the fact that we were very conscious of the fact that we rather stood out, both in the way we carried ourselves, and in our rather mismatched clothing styles.

When we approached the site of the Van der Valk hotel, we heard loud noises that we could not place. They became louder as we got near the entrance. My thoughts immediately went to my worst fear: an angry mob, filming us. The images would haunt us forever and we would be explaining them for the rest of our lives. We would be known as racists. My friend would never get a good job, and that would be because I dragged him into this.

Luckily my friend was more level-headed than I was, and I followed him to where, indeed, a group of about twenty people stood demonstrating in front of the entrance of the hotel. They were making noise with pots and pans, and we realized we had to pass them to get to the hotel entrance. I asked some people standing to the side of the group what they were doing. They said it was a noise protest, because Baudet had made unacceptable statements about the recent war between Ukraine and Russia. They were quite friendly. I said, somewhat panicked, that I was there as a researcher for my thesis, and asked if I could just pass by. They said yes, and that "they would not do anything." Feeling a little ridiculous, we walked by. Some people in the crowd were filming and I didn't really dare to look over too obviously. But once we were inside (the noises from outside had immediately cut off) I read the banners held by the protesters, featuring texts about Russia and here and there Baudet's name.

We joined a line going up a spiral staircase. People of various ages stood waiting with the vast majority over forty or fifty years old. Just like on Monday, I got the impression that I was in the midst of a distinctive combination of subgroups. The older people were, again, a group made up of both men and some women, whereas the younger group was all-male. The younger group looked to be mostly between twenty and twenty-five years old, and resembled the group of younger, neatly dressed men that also had been present in the café on Monday. The older group, again, looked like they came from different social backgrounds and didn't dress in the same styles of clothing. However, even among the older group, many people were obviously dressed for success. They wore neat suits and dresses, and long coats. Whereas in Utrecht there had also been some people present dressed like this, they had been a minority, and were almost all younger men. Here they were clearly the majority, and constituted both young men, and older men and women. My own clothes didn't stand out against the rest this time. However, my friend and I were noticeable. I was one of the only women under 40, while my friend was dressed fashionably but casually. He was the only young man dressed this way. Also, almost everyone in the crowd was white, whereas one of my friend's parents is of color. My friend later told me that he had felt that he was stared at throughout the evening. One woman in particular, who had been sitting in the audience, had recurrently given him looks that had made him uncomfortable.

As we slowly ascended the stairs toward the point where the QR codes on our tickets would be checked, I asked a man standing alone behind us in a neat shirt and gray jacket, if he had seen this before - I gestured to the protesters. He said no, he hadn't. I asked if it had been a tense experience. Again he said no. Indeed, he didn't seem very upset about it. He was focused on his phone, and didn't seem very interested in my questions. I left him alone.

Standing in line, waiting to get in, I have to say that I was really, really nervous. It had been a long day, and I was not at my most energetic, but simultaneously felt full of nervous energy. I had been quite rattled by the demonstration outside, and, like Monday, felt out of place, and was afraid I stood out.

While we were waiting, I spoke to a woman waiting near the cloakrooms. I said hi, and asked her if she goes to these meetings more often. She answered yes, seeming more interested in chatting than the previous man I had approached. I asked her if she had ever seen people demonstrating in front of the entrance before. She said it was a first, but didn't seem too upset about it either. I asked whether it had felt strange to her.

She shrugged and said, "No, they also have a right to freedom of expression, just like us. I even gave them some money." I reacted surprised. At that moment another woman approached and stood next to her. It became clear that she had been waiting for her. "Yes," she laughed, as the other woman now also looked at us with interest. "But they didn't want it. It had *wake up* written on it."

I laughed at that. Then we walked into a large, well-lit room with hundreds of chairs set up to face a small stage that couldn't have been higher than half a meter. Most of the seats were already occupied when we came in, and many people seemed to have already decided to remain standing. I doubted whether there would be enough seats for everyone, but standing tables were also set up. My friend and I found seats in the corner at the very back of the room. The left wall consisted of glass windows, running from the floor all the way up to the ceiling. A man sat alone in the seat on the far left. I asked if we could sit next to him, and he smiled and said yes. I asked him the question that had become my pickup line: "Do you go to these kinds of meetings often?"

He said no, that this was his first time. When I asked him what attracts him to Forum, he said that the way Gideon van Meijeren operates in the parliament really appeals to him. Gideon van Meijeren is an FVD party member most well-known for his overt support for conspiracy theories. When I asked rather suggestively whether he meant that van Meijeren appealed to him in his support of alternative ideas and perspectives, he said again that he simply thought that he does well in

parliament. The man said he was happy to be here because he cannot discuss his political beliefs in other social circles. People are rather quick to judge you when you vote Forum, he said.

When I asked him if he knew where that judgment came from, he was reserved. He did not look at me. I asked if it might be because of the racist Whatsapp messages that leaked. He said that everyone says things now and then that might look really bad out of context, and that stuff always leaks out around the elections. He doesn't pay such accusations much heed. Then he asked what I was doing here, and I explained that I was there out of interest, and because I was doing research for my Master's thesis. He seemed to close up a little after that, but did tell me that I'm allowed to use what he shared with me in my research when I asked.

When the program really started, it was past 20.30 in the evening. It turned out that we were sitting next to the emergency exits. Security guards had already walked past us a few times in a short while, walking out through the emergency exit and, we thought, lounging outside at the top of an iron staircase. We didn't really think about it until the door suddenly swung open and Thierry Baudet and Freek Jansen walked by, just past our knees. It happened quickly and at that moment I didn't realize what was happening. I just registered a gust of wind, and a flash of pressed suits and wide smiles. Then the room exploded into cheers and applause.

The event opened with a carefully montaged, pre-recorded video featuring clips of the Dutch people celebrating festivities. There was a cinematic soundtrack underneath, swelling as the narration, done by Baudet himself, went on.

We are the Dutch. We have the right to stand proudly. Sometimes it seems as if the political madness can't be stopped, but nothing could be further from the truth. Our greatest era is yet to come. (...) Because we love the Netherlands. We love our citizens, our history and our identity. We have tamed wild waters to protect our heritage so that our country could grow forever. Our country is a jewel that we have been given by our ancestors. We will take care of it until our final breath, and pass it on to our next generations. That is our duty as proud citizens of this beautiful country.

The video was clearly designed to resonate and inspire. It painted the Netherlands as a great nation, the product of a history of bravery and hard work. It emphasized the richness of Dutch history and Dutch ancestry, and the importance of passing that on to the generations that come. It celebrated the pride of the Dutch people, which was suggestively linked to Dutch histories of colonialism and conquest through visual phrases such as "taming the wild waters (...) so that our country could grow forever". It also briefly names the 'political madness' standing in the way of this sense of Dutch cultural pride.

Then Baudet himself took the stage with all the flair and flamboyance of a talk show host. He opened with an enthusiastic welcome, emphasizing how glad he was that everyone had come. He singled several people out to joke with them or invite them to come to the front and take an unoccupied seat there. The use of humor at the very start of his speech had the effect of simultaneously breaking the tension in the audience, and building a connection with them. There was a charisma about him that, my friend and I discussed later, was almost magnetic. We spent the first portion of his speech marveling at that in particular.

Baudet initially avoided any controversial political topics, but focused mainly on everyday issues such as economic welfare in the Netherlands. Just as Woodham had done, he mentioned that people had come to the event for different reasons. "However", Baudet said, "many of these reasons overlap. They are the same." He demonstrated this sameness by saying that everyone in the room shared a feeling that things in Dutch society were getting worse, whereas "there are actually people in this society who believe things are getting better." He substantiated this presumed shared feeling by

comparing the ratio of average housing mortgages to an average income for the 1980s, to the considerably less favorable ratio of current-day 2022. When he addressed such serious issues, his style of speech changed from energetic and humorous to one more calm and morose. He talked slowly and, just like Woodham had done, frequently made use of long pauses for emphasis. However, much unlike Woodham, he came across as truly earnest. Like he genuinely cared about the problems he raised. Afterwards he easily snapped back into his style of humor and energy. With every such change the audience seemed to move along in tandem with him. When he grew quiet, you could hear a pin drop. When he made a joke, laughter was thunderous.

Then Baudet announced the true start of his talk. He talked about his personal feelings throughout the pandemic. He made use of emotional and vulnerable language here, saying that the previous two years had transformed him. He called them life-changing. Then he addressed the crowd, emphasizing that the previous two years were, especially for “FVD-ers”, life-changing. That they were bad for everyone, but especially for them. He used the word insight-changing, “a transformation of one way of thinking, and seeing, and feeling, to another,” then, he again said, “and that is what happened for me”.

Baudet seemed intent on both creating a feeling that those in the room were a group, and demonstrating that he himself was also part of it. This relating to the crowd was what Woodham had also attempted. However, Baudet combined a sharing of what he professed was a deeply personal transformation, with the assertion that these same feelings and changes were present in FVD-voters, and again, with the remark that this distinguished FVD-voters from the rest of society. It ignited an emotional energy in the audience. He often mentioned his personal experience, infusing it with strong emotional language and then relating it to what he asserts is the common experience of ‘FVD-voters’. “This is a crime against us.” He said at one point. “Our kind of people.”

Baudet often spoke of an ‘elite’, positioning himself as an “in between person”: someone who has a university education, who used to be a journalist. As someone who was ‘sort of’ part of it. He paints this as a benefit: as making him even more suitable as a leader. “I have exactly the bridging function which you need. I was exactly that in-between person to address those things that the Dutch people actually wanted for a long time, but which have for mysterious reasons - that was what it was like for me - mysterious reasons, didn’t happen. To name a few, cutting back on immigration, a rational [that word again] energy policy.” He painted the FVD’s political stances as things all Dutch citizens want. Then, he said he wanted to recover the connection between “people and representation”. He posits himself as the sole ally, the sole genuine person in a sea of corruption. He emphasized the feelings of betrayal, anger, sadness, loneliness and alienation he experienced throughout the pandemic, all of which he also brought to the political arena. He paints his political opponents as ill intentioned, calculating and cold. However, at a later point he mocks those who disagree with him for exactly that emotional focus. He relates this disdain of such emotional responses to a ‘herd mentality’ and to the media ‘emotionally drugging us’, which again are a means by which those in power control us and take away our freedom and rights. When he talked about political moves he disagreed with, he often called them ‘irrational’, and then argued that this apparent irrationality proved that these plans were in fact part of an insidious scheme

Much like Woodham had done, Baudet often insinuated that being part of the FVD group was a complement to one’s character. FVD-ers, he often said, are uniquely able to see nuance; to think critically; to see politicians’ lies and treachery for what they are. Then, in the style of Van Houwelingen, he tended to use big words, making clear that he was a distinguished, educated man.. The past two years, he said, marked a “fault line” between those who “still believe” in the “changeability of the system”, versus those who think that “this system and this entire societal, economic, social- call it what you will, is so diseased. We have to say goodbye. [This is] a very painful process, because of which I will never be able to look at doctors the same way as before 2020.

Never will be able to look at judges (...) journalists (...) politicians the same way. And even, to my sadness, never be able to look the same way at most of the Dutch.”

At this point a great silence had descended over the room. His speech had taken a turn. Baudet insinuated that, to those in the room, those who know the truth, democratic institutions such as the judicial system and the parliament, as well as doctors and the media, have lost their credibility. Baudet both validated and stoked up feelings of anger, sadness and alienation in regards to the pandemic measures, and in regards to what he called, “the stripping away of our fundamental rights, and our fundamental freedoms”. He painted feelings of anger, sadness and disappointment as natural, justified responses, proportionate to the graveness of these injustices. Then he continued. “And this is why I have chosen a change of course for Forum. Because up until recently, we wanted to save our country in a top-down manner- from the national parliament- and then it seeps through to society... (...) But I have learned that the top is not the place to make changes. It has to come from the bottom. We have to do it ourselves.”

Throughout his speech he created and nourished a sense of emotional and social safety, of alignment, and of belonging. He set apart FVD voters as uniquely in tune with one another. Alike on a profound, deep level, both with each other, and with him. He emphasized continuously that he understood them, and that he is one of them. “Before, I used to be in contact with people through, for instance, an authoritative figure (...) or someone had the same background, someone read the same newspaper, someone watched-” a pause. “And now, it’s- someone has the same heart as I do. Now, I look directly at people, and I’m in contact on a much more fundamental level than I could ever imagine before. And I see some people [in the crowd] nod, and I find that very beautiful. Some people have experienced the same. There is something-” the rest of the sentence was unintelligible as the room was flooded by applause.

I began to feel an increasing amount of dread as the atmosphere in the room grew more and more tense. An emotional energy hung in the air, and it was being geared at an enemy that, if I were to believe Baudet, was genuinely out to hurt us. He linked many social issues to this enemy. The current conflict between Ukraine and Russia, he said, was a means to optimize conditions for seizing more and more control over citizens’ lives. He spoke of people who had refused to obey who had subsequently been killed, or in the case of Trump, ‘cheated [‘gefraudeerd’] out of office’. He talked us through a series of conspiracy theories, among which the Great Reset, all of which had the aim of making us into “slaves according to the Chinese model”. This was all being orchestrated by the global elite. Then, he declared passionately, “the decade of action is, for me, the decade to fight.”

Baudet combined the populist notions of us, the ‘pure people’, versus them, the ‘elite’, with the governmental distrust and reality-questioning conspiracy mindset typical of these times. He combined the suspicion, fear and isolation coinciding with conspiracy thinking, with the image of a malignant elite. He created doubt surrounding reality. In this narrative, he posited himself as both one of the people, and the only person fit to see ‘behind the curtain’ and give guidance. In doing so he ties perfectly into the conspiracy mindset, and seems intent to convince his follower base that these conspiracies are true: that by seeing this, you are rational. You are a critical thinker. And by belonging to FVD, you are safe.

Before he had spoken about the emotional bond existing between FVD-voters on the grounds of their likemindedness. Now saw fit to go further. To do justice to what was said, I decided to transcribe and translate the entire speech.

You form, in my eyes, a friend group, a phalanx, which cannot be broken. You are one club. (...) We now see people become friends, meet, undertake things together, start a company, a school. In September we open five elementary schools, dear friends, and if someone here tonight thinks ‘five is way too little. I am going to take

care of that sixth [school]’, that’s possible. We are a different kind of platform, and we are going to connect farmers to retailers, to restaurants. We have seen something the past two years that is so dark, and so shady, and in a way so sincere. (...) We have seen what their sincere intentions are for us. We have that in common. (...) I stand on the frontlines and I am prepared to die in this battle for human freedom. Because that’s how I see it, this is the existential battle for human freedom. And we are the only club in the Netherlands that does that. (...) All others are more of the same, they go along with the existing narrative. They want a little more of this, a little less of that. But there is not a single movement- and I don’t just want to call Forum a [political] party. A party sounds to me like men who find themselves important in politics and, bla bla bla. We are a movement. And we are doing this together. (...) We are the only movement- In fact we might be the only movement in the Netherlands altogether. But we are the only movement which wants to do this in a fundamental way. And so we are starting schools, and food chains. We have an app. We want to start in time our own currency- cryptocurrency, so that we can pay amongst ourselves and have our own system. We want our own video content, our own news channels. We want to start our own country. Our very own society (Baudet 2022).

The room was alight. People clapped and cheered, and somewhere in the crowd, someone dog-whistled.

This marked the end of Baudet’s speech. He was followed up by Freek Jansen, party member and chair to the JFVD group, known for his strong opposition to immigration - which he says to contribute to the ‘erasure of our community’ - and for his fascination with Hitler and Nazi Germany (Boersema & Zuidervaart 2022). Jansen pleaded for the white ‘Afrikaner’ population in South-Africa (“our people”) to be acknowledged as a structurally oppressed minority. Jansen had, along with fellow FVD party member Simone Kerseboom (herself born to a Dutch father and an Afrikaner mother) recently taken a trip to South Africa to visit the Afrikaner population ‘fighting to be acknowledged as a minority’. This illustrated the odd conceptual space occupied by the notion of racism. He explained the Dutch colonial history in South Africa not as a history of oppression and exploitation, but one of brave, honest workers, sent there by the VOC (Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie) to make a port for Dutch sailors to pick up vegetables on route to the Indies, and prevent scurvy’. Then he continued right onto the following.

Now, 400 years later- they have endured a lot, and at the end of last century, they were politically defeated. (...) In the 19th century they had already become a minority, but in the 20th century they lost their political power. And South Africa, which had been one of the richest countries in Africa. It was part of the Western countries. It was one of the richest countries in the world. They had a huge industry. They had a huge technological advancement going on there. (...) It was just a country as we know it in Europe. And that ended in the 90s. And afterwards, the country fell into total disrepair. (...) There are planned power failures (...) just because there are not enough people working there who can keep the coal-fired power stations going. Because there are quota, and things like that (Jansen 2022).

Jansen skipped over Apartheid entirely, going straight from the commendable, peaceful efforts of the Dutch settlers of South-Africa ahead to ‘400 years later’, where the white population’s power was stripped away until they were a small group facing oppression within their own land. He did not mention that this ‘stripping away of political power’, was the overturning of structures upholding the

oppressive political power of the white population over the black population. The speech instead discussed 'our people' venturing bravely to a new country and performing honest work there, and now fighting for their rights and lives. When discussing the country's state of disrepair, Jansen named diversity quota, which many of my interlocutors strongly oppose, as an example of the mismanagement and a reason for the country's problems. He said that hundreds of Afrikaner children have to go to school without food as a product of 'racial discrimination'. He at no point acknowledged that even today wealth disproportionately rests in the hands of the white population, and race remains the strongest predicting factor for poverty (Sulla, Zikhali & Cuevas 2022: 40). South Africa is stricken by immense income inequality, which undoubtedly impacts lived realities of its entire population, including whites. However, their circumstances were placed in a frame of racial domination, their problems caused by government-forced diversity measures, and by other groups taking from them what they are owed.

Even within this frame he made no mention of apartheid. Poverty in South Africa he only discussed in terms of the white Afrikaners, and he had erased the black population altogether. He spoke of 'black economic empowerment', which, he said, "actually means that white people are not allowed to participate". He said the Afrikaners now organized their own facilities for feeding hungry Afrikaner children, for pruning roadsides. "They have made their own state. They have organized their own state. It is so beautiful (...). And I felt there like I had for a long time not felt in the Netherlands. Surrounded by my own people. By people who were in communion. You didn't even feel the threat. You didn't even feel that this was a people that continuously faced existential threat. These people were there together". He related this to the FVD-voters, who similarly found one another during Corona times. This seems to hit something. The audience, which had previously been dead quiet, erupted into applause. He ventured into a new angle for the story, telling it like an allegory to the struggles faced by the audience. The Afrikaners were a people with which to relate in their experience of oppression and exclusion. "Sometimes it is necessary to look total destruction in the eye to realize what we are doing. People are lazy by nature. They don't continuously want to fight. But when the battle comes, we will fight it. That is exactly what they are doing there, and that is exactly what we will do. We will build, we will make our own institutions. We will make our own organizations. We will do it together. We will make community again. (...) 2022 will be the year of poverty. (...) The energy prices will increase. Inflation will increase. (...) And the only thing we can do about it is not voting, but doing it together."

That marked the end of the speech. Jansen was, for all intents and purposes, a textbook example of the extreme-right activist Sterkenburg had referred to as an 'ideological seeker'. Jansen combined all characteristics: white superiority; an aggrandizement of the Dutch national and ethnic identity perceived to be under threat; a demeaning view of humanity as a whole ('people are lazy by nature'); and a belief in the Great Replacement theory (Sterkenburg 2021: 179-184). This theory, popular in extreme-right communities, holds that the authentic Dutch population is becoming systematically thinned out through diminishing birth rates, mixed-race marriages and migration: that it is becoming a 'minority in its own country' (Sterkenburg 2021: 182).

Jansen's speech had betrayed an obvious racist narrative. However, it mostly avoided overt racialized terms, aside from a few instances where he talked about deprivation and structural oppression of white people. The deliberate manner in which he did - as it was a story infused with the notion of racial difference - gave the distinct impression of tactic. An effort to somehow keep the story between the lines of acceptability. Instead of speaking overtly about racial superiority, he talked about racial oppression of white people. He talked about the Afrikaner people as a symbol to relate to: as an inspiring people coming from a common heritage, and facing similar challenges and now coming to similar conclusions. He at one point called them our 'brother folk'. Especially the argument of communion seemed to do this. This was the point at which I felt distinctly that I was witnessing

something with a clear potential for harm. I wondered whether this speech would have gone over as well, had it been held at the start of the evening. Whether Baudet's earlier speech and the feelings of emotional connection, community, and deprivation it had inspired, had laid a necessary foundation for Jansens' speech to be received the way it was. I should now note that it became more obvious than ever that the argument of 'ability to see nuance' often used by FVD politicians to dodge criticism of their ideology, is a ploy and tactic. All nuance was completely absent from Jansens speech.

After the speeches and the introductions of the municipal candidates, there was an opportunity to ask questions. All of the questions were on conspiracies, living in freedom, the parallel society, losing friends and loved ones during the pandemic because they did not agree with their conspiracy mindset. None at all were asked about Freek Jansen's plea. It was a lesson on the odd space occupied by notions of race and histories of racism in the Netherlands. At one point Baudet enthusiastically said that he believed everyone should be free to live freely as they are, and be who they are, without hindrance from others. He had been openly questioned, by two people from a Catholic church, about his stance on homosexuality. They asked him how he is planning to safeguard churches' rights to denounce homosexuality. In response to this, he launched into a passionate rant about how the beauty of Dutch society rests in variety and freedom. He argued that everyone should be free to be who they are regardless of their sexuality, their sex, their ethnicity, or their, and he says this mockingly, transsexuality. "What others do is their business. Just don't bother me with it." It contrasts, firstly, against Baudet's own decidedly passionate argument for a parallel society 'loose' of the other Dutch people who have not seen the light. And secondly with Freek Jansen's earlier talk, which featured extremely thinly veiled racism.

One of the final people to be called on was a woman over sixty with short, gray hair. She firstly told Baudet that his stories about the parallel society make her very enthusiastic. She called it "the free society, the loving society". Then, in a tearful voice, she said, "where everybody is welcome." Then she says, "for me the question remains, how will we get rid of those corrupt other parties? How do you get rid of parliament so that you can indeed start your own society, together with these free people who have now found each other like this- who are so connected?" There are murmurs of agreement in the crowd. She continues, "how do we get rid of these rules, this bureaucracy, this slave system- which I have myself, by the way, recently opted out of." The last sentence is followed by a thunderous applause. Baudet's reply is, "Firstly, congratulations on opting out. That is the key question. (...) I think that we have to do several things at once. We have to connect to one another as well as we can- what happens here, tonight, means so much. (...) Meet at least one new person here. We really have to form our own network (...). In a short while we will have an app called Forumland. And if you're a member you can log in, and you can meet one another, you can buy food from one another, you can arrange an internship place, you can upload job offers, or a vacation house, or a lawyer- we are going to start our own little ecosystem. (...) That is one. Two, we have to make our mark internationally. We have to make sure they meet our resistance movement in Austria. And maybe in France. And the US. (...) And then all together we'll go [somewhere else in the world]."

Then, there is a final question. A woman asked how it can be assumed that no election fraud will take place here in the Netherlands. Baudet, rather flatly, said the following.

We can't. But it doesn't matter, because even if we have two-thirds of votes, even then we'll have the financial system against us. Those elections are just symbolic (...). What those elections do is they make it possible for these amazing people [gesturing to the party members] to every day be the shield. To everyday take the blows, and show everyone what courage means, what arguments are, what truth is. But there is the shield and the sword. And only the sword eventually wins the battle.

We stop [attacks], we take blows- but *you* are the sword. That's what it's about. Elections, parliamentary seats, that's all very nice. But it's about us building something. That is the power. Therein lies the energy (Baudet 2022).

I cannot say for sure what Baudet's intentions were, or whether he truly believed what he proclaimed. But whatever these intentions, the truth is that he actively argued to an audience which he, himself, seemed to emotionally charge and manipulate, that the democratic system of the Netherlands as we know it is corrupt and illegitimate, and that this corruption cannot be fought from within this system. The only way to solve this, to "save the country", is to change this order from the bottom to the top as a movement. What 'changing' this order entailed, really, was not specifically discussed, but he argued that voting - exercising their democratic rights - doesn't make a difference due to the corruption of the system, and that it is time to take action. Not as a political party, he emphasized, but as a movement. He seemed to actively try to create a sense of emotional affinity both with his party and with himself; to create a sense of belonging, distinguishment and purpose (to 'save this beautiful country', to 'regain our fundamental rights and freedoms', to 'get rid of the corrupt, ill-intentioned elite'); and then actively try to convince those in the crowd that the 'system' itself is corrupt, too. That, for those things to be achieved, those in the room needed to be a movement and cause change from the bottom to the top. Although he was not clear on what 'being a movement to change the system bottom-up' meant, he often used militant language, and at one point declared that he would be "willing to die".

Conclusion

Before attending these events I had heard countless times that I was caught inside my own left-wing bubble and had no idea what went on outside it or how the information I read was biased or distorted. And I had begun to realize that that was true, and had begun to doubt everything I thought I knew about political parties and movements I disagreed with. However, during these meetings, I was provided a peek behind the curtain: a direct window into the right-wing populist narrative of Forum voor Democratie. What I learned will likely forever alter the way I understand right-wing extremism, what draws people to it, and how it is motivated, explained and the important role of emotion and group belonging in this.

The evenings made clear how the populist party Forum voor Democratie actively creates and facilitates a feeling of community and shared emotional experience among its different voter segments. It showed how experiences of exclusion, deprivation, and powerlessness, were connected to an enemy. This enemy constitutes a morally superior left-wing, a malignant elite, and the fabrics of democracy. There was a seemingly deliberate use of emotional validation to make people feel connected to FVD, its leaders, and other FVD-voters, and to paint them as separated from and even incompatible to the rest of Dutch society, deemed to be going along with what is expected of them by malicious global elites pulling the strings. The world outside of FVD was painted as a fake reality, which FVD encourages rejecting altogether. Then, the narrative built towards an image of the only way for FVD-members to live in truth, happiness and connection with one another, is to reject Dutch society. Democracy itself is painted as a vehicle by which corrupt elites maintain control and exercise their evil agenda. Audience members were told that they should not fight these structures from within, but from outside the structures of democracy. By forming a movement, and by 'fighting for our fundamental rights'. This fight was painted as a noble cause, which Baudet, in his own words, was willing to die for.

The narrative of Fvd was infused with racism, which politicians simultaneously proclaimed to disapprove of. This racism was sometimes implicit and sometimes explicit, and always bundled up in a moral narrative highlighting a different moral element. In Woodham's speech, he had both asserted

that FVD was welcome to people of all ethnicities, as well as insisted that the racist and antisemitic Whatsapp messages which had leaked out to the public had been unacceptable only because the whistleblowers had betrayed the group, and transgressed group loyalty. The whistle-blowers were painted not as combating racism, but as 'judases', traitors. In Jansens' speech about the need to acknowledge the white population of South Africa as an oppressed minority, again he never truly spoke about the apartheid history. In many ways, Jansen called to mind the image of the extreme-right type Sterkenburg previously described as ideological seekers (2021: 182). He seemed to combine the glorification with the Dutch cultural identity, with white supremacy, with a clear reference to the Great Replacement Theory. In telling the history of the Dutch colonial settlers, he meant for those in the audience to relate to the South African settlers, referring to them as our 'brother folk'. He chose to omit the potent racist oppression within this history, and instead spoke of 'our people' taking a brave leap to settle onto South-African land to help the VOC. He made it into a story of bravery, of building a rich, successful state, and of an oppressed people finding communion with one another even under circumstances of structural inequality, deprivation and blundering national leadership. He spoke of banding together to take care of hungry children where the government failed to do so. Here, the importance of hard work, of bravery, of striving for affluence, of community, of taking care of one another, and of not relying on the support of the state to do 'what's right', were highlighted as moral elements to this story. Especially in the latter case of the two, the racism was more overt than I had beforehand expected it to be. Even though Jansen omitted some contextual elements to South African history, and didn't overtly discuss race or racism, it was obvious what he was talking about, and what he hinted at. Although it isn't possible to say for sure, I do wonder whether Baudet's earlier speech and the feelings it had instilled in the crowd, had any effect over the way Jansens' speech was received.

Conclusion

This study has explored the moral narratives of right- and far-right users of the subreddit pages /FreeDutch and /Forum_Democratie, and compared these to the tactical choices of the Dutch political party Forum voor Democratie.

The elements of freedom and personal responsibility were critical to how my interlocutors positioned themselves within their moral narratives. They expressed feelings of frustration and disappointment with the current times, feeling that these are characterized by rapid cultural shifts that seemed to sideline them. They were averse to current sociocultural and political debates concerning equality, identity and oppression. They motivated this by pointing to the elements of control and limitation that surrounded it. They felt they were not allowed to take part in debates, both on the grounds of their identity (whiteness, maleness, characteristics beyond their control) and on the grounds of their opposing stance. They felt that this essentially made the debate into a constricting, limiting endeavor that precluded any actual discussion. They did not recognize assertions of the innate position of power they occupied simply by being white or being male. Rather, they asserted that they were currently excluded from these debates, which in effect made them powerless.

They felt that institutional control and speech norms actively constrained them in what they were able to achieve, think and how they could express themselves. Discrimination was viewed as warranted and based on truth (or statistics) and as the responsibility of those discriminated against to change. Within this frame, hiring quota were not seen as means to level out conditions of sociocultural inequality already in place. Rather, they were understood as imposing governmental control to actively create inequality. Political correctness was viewed as both ingenuine and overly controlling, doing little to address the issues and problems of society. On the other hand, the misfortune of 'the Dutch poor' was related to the negligent and blundering government and their needlessly imposing interventions.

These preferences for freedom and personal responsibility, combined with their frustration with control and with the assertions that they were privileged oppressors, seemed to justify inequality in the world, while simultaneously reclaiming my interlocutors' value and their achievements in light of the facets of their identity qualifying them as powerful or oppressors. It reconciled their acknowledgment of inequality, with their self-image as a fair, moral human being. After all, in a world of freedom and personal responsibility, everyone is free to do with the circumstances that be. They can complain and talk about inequality, or they can work hard, seize opportunities and reap the benefits.

What became clear is that my interlocutors' moral narratives were characterized by a struggle to position themselves in a world that, in their eyes, devalues them and singles them out as the cause of misery, inequality and oppression, and simultaneously tells them that their opinions are irrelevant. This dynamic seems to be self-reinforcing and circular. My interlocutors expressed a clear frustration with the left-wing and its 'intolerance toward divergent opinions'. They often referred to the notion of a powerful 'elite'. This power constituted money and status, but also meant the power to impose controls on others. They perceived the left-wing to exude an attitude of moral superiority, which was similarly perceived as a type of control, serving to disqualify them without ever acknowledging their arguments.

The implications of this dynamic are best demonstrated by way of the notion of racism, which was the center of much division in the spaces of debate I frequented. My interlocutors generally conceptualized racism as something intentional and malicious. This conceptualization excluded subtle and perhaps unintentional forms of racism. These differing conceptualizations could have spurred an interesting conversation on the histories of colonialism. Instead, efforts to talk about racism and discrimination were met with strong resistance, bringing to mind connotations of being called a racist,

which my interlocutors resented. The morally superior attitude exuded by the Left was experienced by all my interlocutors alike. Racism seemed to starkly demonstrate this issue. Racism was deemed evil, but also held strong connotations of being accused of racism. This evoked feelings of spite, which were in turn projected onto minority groups. This is how frustrations with institutional control and speech norms, combined with institutional distrust, produced a dynamic where racism was condoned by the same people who proclaimed that it was the ultimate evil. What ran like a thread throughout this narrative was a feeling of being ignored, devalued and set aside, as well as blamed for inequality, racism and discrimination.

The aversion to censorship seemed to push people to places without censorship. Forum voor Democratie was able to exploit these feelings. They validated the moral judgment, anxieties and lacks they felt, while proclaiming to see their value. There was a strong, emotional aspect to the way the party engaged with its audience: the party members claimed not just to represent voters, but to have a strong, emotional connection with them. FVD partisanship was likened to living in a reality of truth, whereas the rest of Dutch society was asleep. They were painted as different. As belonging only with one another. All of this was linked to an image of a malignant enemy, taking the form of Dutch politicians, 'the elite' and powerful, and the Dutch democracy. The party members overtly claimed that the only way to fight this corruption, was to fight the democratic system itself - not from within, by 'playing the game', but by 'fighting' a fight they were 'willing to die for'. This tactic was too perfectly tailored to what I had learned to be anything but intentional. It demonstrated an awareness of what people missed, what they wanted to hear, and a willingness to offer it, asking only one thing in exchange: to share their beliefs. Everyone is welcome, as long as they are like-minded. But if they are not, they are the enemy.

Recommendations for future research are, for the topic and research group at hand, to look into the app Telegram. I was advised by multiple interviewees to also look at Telegram groups, since that is where many people have moved to to discuss opinions not deemed acceptable on Reddit. People came to Reddit to discuss and 'hear different stories than the mainstream'. They do not necessarily have to do that on Reddit. Telegram, as spaces where the like minded can unite, free from scrutiny by those who disagree. Forum voor Democratie encouraged this. That, coupled with an enemy image consisting of everyone except for the like-minded, is a breeding ground for isolation and polarization.

As a closing recommendation I want to note that I do not believe that prohibiting speech or groups, is necessarily the answer. We cannot force people to venture into a society they don't feel like they belong to. Rather, we have to acknowledge each other. We have to acknowledge one another's narratives, and the inherent value of them. For people to want to move along with progressive social discussions about what race is, and what inequality is, and what that implies and requires of us, it is important that we do not reject and discount one another, but are willing to truly discuss.

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