The symbolic representation of gender: an introduction

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On the 14th of April 2008 a seven-month pregnant Minister of Defence shows the Spanish troops for the first time; first time not only for her, but also for other women, all citizens, the army and democracy in Spain. Carme Chacón – the first woman to have inspected the troops in Spain – was appointed minister within the Spanish socialist cabinet of President Rodríguez Zapatero. The sight of Minister Chacón inspecting the troops on her first day in office with her rounded belly covered by a white maternity blouse is a picture that Spaniards – and other people outside Spain – will not easily forget. It is a picture that was on the front page of several national and international newspapers. It was a picture worth a thousand words.

Why is that picture so powerful to attract people and media’s attention? At a first glance, the picture shows, on the one hand, maternity, symbol of womanhood, in an unusually represented position of leadership and command, and, on the other hand, the army, symbol of masculinity as associated with physical strength and defence, this time in an also unusually represented situation of subordination and obedience towards a woman in a position of supreme authority. The pregnant minister is invading a space (Puwar 2004) that tends to be associated with men. The picture could also attract people’s attention due to the suggestion of a possible clash between life, as symbolised by maternity, and death, as symbolised by the army. It turned upside down socially ingrained expectations about the role of women and men and the respective hierarchy between the sexes that are still very much present and perpetuated through dominant cultural codes.

A second glance at the picture opens up many other meanings, which vary depending on the spectators’ perspective. Some feminist political actors interpreted the image as a symbol that women are starting to break the glass ceiling, trespassing typically masculine political institutions. The Minister’s pregnant body symbolizes the representation of the female sex in a political environment, such as the Ministry of Defence, that has been a typically male territory. This image makes powerfully visible women’s presence in male dominated political areas and, what is more, with a leading position. Therefore, ‘It is an important image precisely because it conveys normality’, as President of the Spanish feminist organization Fundación Mujeres Marisa Soleto said, because ‘It serves a pedagogic function: it shows that women can be and are everywhere’2. Moreover, the picture challenges the traditionally ingrained idea that women and defence are a contradiction in terms since the task of protecting the country has culturally been considered as a man’s task, where masculinity is mainly associated with strength, and – metonymically – with defence. Finally, the image of a pregnant minister showing the troops can also be a symbol of the different roles of the army, which include not only military combat but also humanitarian and peace-keeping operations. Former Secretary for Equality Mariel Montaño suggests this other meaning when she says that the image of the pregnant Minister of Defence ‘shows that the army does not just have to fulfill this masculine role of force, it can be more feminine, more humanitarian’3.

From the perspective of more conservative political actors, the image of a pregnant Minister of Defence raised all sorts of concerns. Newspapers such as *El Mundo* express scepticism about the capacity of a pregnant minister – soon mother-to-be – to manage the portfolio of defence, and question whether she should take the 16 weeks maternity leave guaranteed by Spanish law or rather shorten the leave given her new political responsibilities. Right-wing newspapers such as *ABC* and *La Razón* worry that, due to the socialist Prime Minister Zapatero’s ‘political correctness’ in appointing women, many talented men will be excluded from top jobs in Spanish public administrations to the benefits of incompetent female politicians. For these conservative voices the image of the pregnant minister inspecting the troops is a symbol of incompetence and incapacity for the political task that awaits her. The minister is also criticised due to the fear that she might redirect the army to aid rather than military duties because of her supposedly pacifist ideas, symbolised by her pregnancy. In this respect, the concern is not only related to the fact that she is a woman, but also to the fact that because she is a pregnant woman, she might represent pacifist ideas that are supposedly not to be associated with the tasks of the ministry of defence.

What does this closer glance at the image of the Spanish pregnant minister showing the troops tell us? First, the picture has a political character, what we are discussing here is an issue of political representation in general, and of symbolic political representation in particular. Second, the debate over the meaning of the picture reminds us that there are different interpretations of what a political image symbolises. The meaning of the symbol is contested in political discourses, it can mean different things to different people. And third, the image is a gendered symbol; it suggests meanings and beliefs that are associated with women and men, their socially constructed relationship, and the roles that society has culturally attributed to them. The analysis of each of these statements will move us directly into the theme of this book on the symbolic representation of gender.

In this introductory chapter we define what we mean by symbolic representation and do so in relation to Pitkin’s definition of political representation. We clarify where we stand with respect to Pitkin, and draw the borders of a concept such as symbolic representation that is at the same time broad and understudied by scholars in gender and politics. We then discuss in section two who or what is the agent of symbolic representation in this book, introducing the discursive turn in the analysis of symbolic representation within the gender and politics literature. In section three we argue that gender is the principal in our definition of symbolic representation, clarifying how this choice of principal differs from Pitkin’s, and referring to feminist studies on gender and nations that have especially discussed the symbolic construction of women and men. The final section introduces the different chapters of this book.

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5 Gabriel Sanz ‘Zapatero confía su apuesta por Igualdad e Innovación a dos ministras novatas’; J. A. ‘Carme Chacón. Un ministerio complejo como premio a los resultados del 9M’, *ABC* 13 April 2008.
1. Symbolic representation

*Pitkin’s definition*

Political representation is about making someone, generally the citizen, present in one way or another, while that person as such is not physically present. In her seminal work on the concept of political representation, Pitkin (1967) distinguished four dimensions of making present: formalistic views on representation, symbolic or descriptive representation, and substantive representation. While the first view merely deals with the formal rules of the representation established, both symbolic and descriptive representation describe a way in which agents, those representing, are ‘standing for’ principals, those being represented, either symbolically or literally, focusing on the who in the issue of representation. Pitkin herself was most charmed by substantive representation, since it focuses on the act of representation itself, on what the agent does in order to represent the principal. According to her only in this case we can speak of representing as substantive activity, and that is what it should mainly be about.

Pitkin (1967) defined the symbolic dimension of representation that we study in this book as the representation of a group, nation or state through an object, to which a certain representative meaning is attributed. Or, put in the language of political representation: symbolic representation is the representation of the principal (the one who is represented) through an agent (the one who is representing), to which a certain representative meaning is attributed. Agents or objects generating symbolic representation are, for instance, national flags or anthems (Cerulo 1993), public buildings and institutions (Edelman 1976), statues, and the design of public spaces and capitals (Parkinson 2009; Sonne 2003). Much the same as Marianne symbolically represents France and the 12 golden stars in a circle on a blue background represent the European Union. A symbol is commonly defined in dictionaries as an image or object that suggests or refers to something else, and symbolic representation is indeed something visible that by association or convention represents something else that is invisible. The visual image of the Spanish pregnant minister inspecting the troops is suggesting many different invisible meanings, as we formerly argued. Thus, the particularity of symbolic representation resides in the capacity of the symbol, the agent, to evoke or suggest a meaning, belief, feeling and value related and appropriate to the principal (Childs 2008; Northcutt 1991; Parel 1969). In that ‘(t)hey [symbols] make no allegations about what they symbolize, but rather suggest or express it.’ (Pitkin 1972: 94).

We stand with Pitkin in this aspect of her definition of symbolic representation that points at the hidden, evocative function of symbols as recipients of feelings and made of ‘beliefs, attitudes, assumptions of people’ (Pitkin 1967: 99-100). This includes Pitkin’s argument that the link between symbol and referent is arbitrary and relies on people’s emotional responses ‘rather than on rationally justifiable criteria’ (p 100). Thus, an important part of the definition of symbolic representation that we draw from Pitkin is that responses to the symbol, as in her examples of national pride in not letting the flag touch the ground,
depend on training and forming habits in the people so that certain meanings are associated to a particular symbol and end up generating particular affective responses towards symbols (pp 100-101). The connection between symbol and affective response is a matter of habit and training, not of rational justification and understanding. Thus a political leader such as a king or queen in Pitkin’s example is accepted as a symbolic representative as long as the leader is believed in, and to make people believe in the symbolic representative, particular habits and affective responses have to be formed. We have seen that the image of the Spanish pregnant minister is a symbolic representative out of place according to emotional responses and formed habits that deem appropriate for a minister of defence to be not pregnant or directly to be male. Due to ingrained beliefs and attitudes about what is the appropriate role of women and men in our society the image of the minister evoked particularly contested meanings and feelings among the people. We will come back to other aspects of Pitkin’s and our definition of symbolic representation after a brief overview of how the study of gender and political representation has evolved in gender and politics research.

The ‘Cinderella’ of Pitkin’s dimensions of political representation

Out of the four different dimensions of political representation theorised by Pitkin (1967), symbolic representation has long remained neglected in the literature on gender and politics. Scholars in this field have mainly focused on descriptive, and, more recently, substantive representation. Since the early 1990s, a growing body of literature focused on the gender imbalance in politics, its causes and means to overcome such inequality. Much of this work was normative at the outset, attempting to construct a theoretical argument for why more women were needed in politics. Looking into existing theories on representation and citizenship, it argued why these approaches were wrong and what was needed – a politics of presence or parity democracy – to redress the gender imbalance (Phillips 1995; Mossuz Lavau 1998). In the shadow of this body of thinking, more empirically oriented researchers broke open political systems, unravelling electoral systems, and procedures of recruitment, selection and election of candidates. They pointed at the gender bias inherent in institutional structures, rules and procedures (Rule and Zimmerman 1994; Tremblay 2008). It was the moment when gender quotas made it to the political agenda (Dahlerup 2006; Krook 2006; Marques Pereira and Nolasco 2001), first in Latin America, France and Belgium, today all around the world.

This focus on women’s underrepresentation in politics and the argumentation for an increased and equal number of women in politics, led feminist scholars to the question of their (both women’s and quotas) added value to politics. Since the theoretical construct was deemed insufficient, the direction taken in gender and politics research was based on the argument: ‘if we want more women in politics, we need to be able to show that they have an added value’. This argument generated an impressive body of research linking descriptive and substantive representation, which explored what difference women make in politics and to what extent and under what conditions they are better apt to represent women citizens than their male colleagues would do (for an overview see Childs and Krook 2008). The results of scholarly works on the substantive representation of women were mixed, ranging from ‘yes,
women definitely make a huge difference’ to ‘we need more feminists, not more women’ (Tremblay and Pelletier 2000) – implying that feminists could also be male and that men could hence substantially represent women. Studies on substantive representation such as Celis et al (2008; Celis 2009) problematised the idea of women’s interests, challenging their unitary character, and discussed the role of ‘critical individuals’ more than ‘critical mass’ as key to influence women’s substantive representation. In the wake of the feminist interest, a broader renewed interest in the concept of representation arose, leading to discussions about political representation as a construction (Squires 2008), as an issue of making claims on behalf of others (Saward 2010), and about the fact that the audience might not even have elected the one claiming to represent them (Saward 2009). The search for a greater quality of democracy includes not only electoral representation as legitimate within a democratic community, but also non electoral representation, as that exercised by NGOs or interest groups (Saward 2009). This scholarly interest in a broader concept of political representation that goes ‘beyond the electoral game of legitimation’ (Stoffel 2008: 144; 2011; Rehfeld 2006) opens the door to reflections on the ‘Cinderella’ of Pitkin’s dimensions of political representation, the symbolic one.

Pitkin’s symbolic representation has indeed received little attention so far, despite the fact that symbols are of utmost importance in politics. The political space, political processes, activities, language, public policies and the communication around them being full of symbols. In literature on gender and politics, the importance of symbols and of symbolic representation is often to be found in studies on how nations or states symbolize women and how symbols use, reproduce and produce images of women (see for instance Tolz and Booth 2005; Yuval-Davis 1997; Rai 2008). With respect to political representation in the strict sense of the term, though, symbolic representation has been poorly neglected. Therefore, considering that women and men are relevant political symbols and that political symbols are gendered, the aim of this book is to add a piece in what is currently a rather empty puzzle on gender and symbolic political representation.

Other definitions of symbolic representation

But why is symbolic representation in the gender and politics literature so understudied? One of the possible reasons why symbolic representation in the gender and politics scholarship has been under-researched is that it is a very broad concept that can be interpreted in many different ways and that is difficult to operationalise. First of all, symbolic representation can mean political symbolism in general, as flags representing a particular nation or ideology well exemplify, and in this respect definitions of symbolic representation as that of this book belong to the wider family of political symbolism (see chapter two on theoretical approaches of symbolic representation). However, we prefer to use the term symbolic representation rather than political symbolism because we are interested not only in exploring the symbols and their political meaning as such, but also what they represent – at the symbolic level. We think that the discursive construction of men and women in for instance public policy documents, is a form of political representation, symbolic political representation. Also, more
broadly speaking, we are interested in how these representations relate to the other dimensions of political representation. The different dimensions of political representation have traditionally been studied one by one, although there are exceptions, such as Schwindt-Bayer and Mishler (2005), who developed an integrated model of women’s representation, showing the interconnectedness of the different dimensions. Schwindt-Bayer (2010: 7) reminds us that – according to Pitkin – representation cannot be disaggregated into its component parts and rather needs to be considered as a whole, examining the four dimensions of formalistic, descriptive, symbolic and substantive representation and their relations.

While we will have specific chapters discussing relations between symbolic and other dimensions of representation, we will also pay attention to these relations in the analysis of the functions of symbolic representation, discussing – at a theoretical more than an empirical level – how the different constructions of women and men can interact with issues of descriptive and substantive representation. For instance, the picture of the Spanish pregnant Minister of Defence showing the troops touches issues related to descriptive, symbolic, and substantive representation. By being a woman, she mirrors the existing female constituency, in this respect reflecting an improvement in descriptive political representation –as it emerged from the statement of the civil society actor that the minister is a symbol of the normality of women’s physical presence in all political domains. Especially through her pregnant body, the minister evokes a shift in symbolic representation in the typical feature that social imagery has attributed to military leaders, that is the male sex. This change at the symbolic level is advocated by actors defending gender equality and contested by actors defending the maintenance of traditional gender images and roles in political institutions. From the perspective of substantive representation, the image of a pregnant minister of defence is interpreted as a symbol of pacifism, which is positively or negatively assessed depending on the actors’ ideology. The extent to which the minister pursued a more peaceful approach or acted for women would need to be analysed empirically. However, what can be said is that Chacón was one out of eight female ministers within the first parity government in Spanish history, which was a symbolic act which had both descriptive and substantive implications for political representation. It not only mirrored the gender constituency of a society composed of half women and half men but was also presented as a first step in the representation of gender equality issues as a priority on the new government’s agenda. In short, this example shows the interaction of symbolic with descriptive and substantive representation. In our analysis of symbolic representation we will take this into account.

Symbolic representation is also used to mean symbolic or window-dressing politics and policies. Symbolic here is used in the sense of not being effective. There is but a marginal (if at all) achievement. In Mazur’s (1995) analysis of French equal employment policies, ‘symbolic reform occurs when policies designed to address certain social problems fail to effectively solve those problems.’ Symbolic policies would serve a symbolic purpose of ‘image making’ for politicians, but they ‘appear destined to have little real impact’ (Mazur 1995: 2). Symbolic is then seen as the opposite of substantial, which focuses on the fact that something really substantial is (being) achieved. This opposition can be found in debates on gender quotas, as will be discussed in chapter seven. While we will pay attention to the limits
of symbolic representation in this book, we mostly do not aim to analyse this window-dressing interpretation of politics and policies as such. However, such window dressing politics can be a form of symbolic representation. While politics and policies can be empty rhetoric in the facts, they can be seen as representations at the symbolic level, whereby a specific discourse stands for a political entity (Baker 2007: 297). We therefore see symbolic representation as producing political meanings, which (are supposed to) evoke particular feelings and beliefs about women and men in politics. These can influence the way politicians behave and the way citizens and the electorate feel represented and position themselves with respect to politicians (see next sections on discursive turn and gender).

The few works on symbolic representation within the literature on gender and politics have also discussed symbolic representation focusing on the relation between the representative and the electorate. Schwindt-Bayer (2010: 6) for instance refers to symbolic representation in terms of ‘what the symbolic consequences of women’s election to office are for the electorate’. Her definition recalls Pitkin’s, as for her ‘symbolic representation emphasizes that representation is a symbol that generates emotional responses among constituents (i.e. feelings and beliefs about politics or government).’ (Schwindt-Bayer 2010: 6) The way Schwindt-Bayer and others (Childs 2008; Franceschet, Krook and Piscopo 2012; Zetterberg 2009, 2012) operationalize symbolic representation is by looking at the effect of women in politics on the public opinion through the use of surveys and opinion polls, studying changes in political attitudes, such as a more positive attitude towards politics or an increase of the perceived legitimacy of political institutions. This research on symbolic representation looks at the broader effects of women’s descriptive representation for politics, then relating what women’s presence generates to what is happening at a more normative level. The attention thereby is mainly on the broader audience (citizens) and sometimes on the principal (women in this case). In this book, we stick closer to Pitkin’s focus on the agent in her understanding of symbolic representation, the symbol ‘standing for’ someone or something. The main way we approach symbolic representation in this book is by analysing the symbolic construction of women and men as political symbols and the gendered nature of political symbols, and their implications for women’s political representation.

2. A discursive turn in the analysis of symbolic representation

Recasting the agent of symbolic representation

Symbolic representation, as we saw in Pitkin’s definition, stands for the representation of the principal through an agent to which a certain representative meaning is attributed. But who or what is the agent of symbolic representation? Objects and images such as statues or flags, are commonly cited as agents. The picture of the Spanish female minister showing the troops that we have discussed before is an example of such an agent, be it of flesh and blood, whose principal would be women or even all citizens, and whose representative meaning can change,
depending on the different actors’ perspectives, from being a symbol of ‘equality’ to being a symbol of ‘incompetence’.

In this book, however, we will not analyse visual portrayals, but rather discursive agents. Symbolic representation can also be discursive and based on the use of language (Bondi 1997, drawing on Lacan; Bourdieu 1991), a possibility which had not been considered by Pitkin. This is all the more interesting as not only flags but also national anthems symbolically stand for nations and states, whereby the words are at least as important as the sound of the music. By exploring the issue from a discursive politics approach, the conceptualisation of symbolic representation in this book expands and differs from Pitkin’s one. We argue that taking discourse as the agent in symbolic representation is particularly helpful to capture the gendered meaning that symbols suggest or evoke. The discursive turn in the theory on symbolic representation that we suggest here implies the adoption of a perspective that pays attention to the meaning that the agent has and what that implies for those being represented, the principal, as well as for the broader audience. In our discursive approach we are interested in analysing by what symbols women and men are constructed in political discourses, how political symbols are gendered, and what these symbols tell. This analysis will provide us with elements to assess the symbolic representation of gender, how and the extent to which discursive constructions legitimize women as agents and principals in politics with respect to men.

In this book we study symbolic representation from a discursive politics approach by adopting the qualitative methodology of critical frame analysis as developed within the European research projects on gender equality policies MAGEEQ (www.mageeq.net) and QUING (www.quing.eu) in which we have participated as researchers. Critical frame analysis is a tool that enables us to grasp the different meanings of the symbolic representation of gender, by making explicit how policy issues are framed, and what are the underlying norms and values that appear in policy discourses. We will analyse policy discourses in a variety of empirical cases from Europe – such as Belgium, Italy, The Netherlands, Spain and the European Union polity – that are chosen for their meaningfulness as examples of particular policy framings, rather than for their representativeness. The details of the methodology are discussed in chapter three. Data on political discourses analysed through critical frame analysis are employed to explore a number of functions of symbolic representation, in particular that of constructing identity, that of political control and that of creating legitimacy, which are discussed more in detail in chapter two.

Studying contestation and change

Discursive approaches to gender equality and other public policies underline the impact of specific normative constructions of men and women in such policies on the furthering of gender equality (Bacchi 1999), through the labelling of specific groups as having problems or

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6 Thanks to Amy Mazur and Tània Verge for making us point out how our concept of symbolic representation relates to Pitkin’s.
as being problematic, while other groups appear as setting the norm of the role to play or behaviour to follow (Verloo 2007). For instance, family policies have mostly associated the concept of ‘family’ with a man, a woman, and children, rather than with two women, or two men, with or without children. This prevalent symbolic association of family with a heterosexual type of family, that we can identify in political discourses, can be read as the affective response to hegemonic heteronormative habits, practices, and values formed in processes of socialization.

While symbols fix meanings and norms that can be difficult to change, think for example of the perpetuation of traditional gender roles shown in visual agents such as the gendered use of pink and blue colours for babies, symbols are also contested by a variety of actors (Ferree et al. 2002) who attempt to propose new symbols to change traditional constructions of women, men, families, or citizens. Visual images by social movement protesters analysed by Doerr (2010) in EuroMayday events, constructed and shared in a transnational public space, have shown potential for challenging official visions of the flexible mobility of EU citizens, suggesting instead a European citizenship that includes migrant subjects and solidarity values. Images shared by transnational activists, such as those opposing precarity and EU borders to migration, not only broaden the political meaning of European citizenship proposed by EU politics but also construct a public space for engaging in a “visual dialogue” nourished by activists’ internal disagreements on representations of citizenship, migration and precarity in Europe’ (Doerr 2010: 23). Apart from visual symbolic alternatives on citizenship there are also visual symbolic constructions that are alternative to the traditional ‘heterosexual couple and child’ family, such as the ILGA-Europe campaign ‘different families, same love’ on occasion of the 2010 Europride showing pictures of a family as made of two mothers, two fathers, two mothers or two fathers and children that attempt to change the traditional symbolic imagery of what a family is. One of the pictures of ILGA-Europe’s campaign for promoting social acceptance of different families shows two fathers and a child sitting on a bench and the picture is titled ‘children first’. The image reverses the meaning of a typical slogan used in homophobic discourses that oppose homosexual parenting with the argument that the wellbeing of children is associated to heterosexual parents. It is particularly the contestation and renegotiation of symbols – that ultimately is a contestation and renegotiation of norms – that can be fruitfully grasped through a discursive analysis.

As formerly mentioned, in Pitkin’s theory, symbols have the power to evoke affective, emotional responses formed through habits and training. This suggests the fact that the emotional responses that symbols provoke are not necessarily intentional in people’s minds but rather the result of socialization processes and practices that create particular cultural codes, norms, and values that actors are not always aware of. These formed emotional responses are the ones that can move us for instance to associate women politicians with particular policy areas, such as health or social policies rather than defence or finance, which are emotionally more associated with male politicians. A discursive turn in the analysis of

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7 Thanks to Michele Beyeler for the idea of this example.
symbolic representation can be helpful to grasp this aspect of unconscious unintentionality of people’s emotional responses to symbols. Discursive politics theories have originated in studies on the intentional and strategic use of frames on the part of social movement actors (Snow and Benford 1988, 1992; Ferree et al. 2002) to alter the perception of policy problems and to influence preferences, with the aim of mobilising followers to their cause and discouraging opponents. Gender and politics research adopting discursive politics approaches (Bacchi 1999, 2009; Lombardo, Meier and Verloo 2009; Verloo 2007) has conceptualised frames as also showing an unintentional dimension that reflects deep cultural and institutional meanings, which can steer policy actors’ discourses in directions they are not necessarily aware of, such as for example hegemonic discourses on women being the principal care provider. This implies looking at how gender is represented in hegemonic discourses that make particular relations and categories of people as symbols of what is appropriate, legitimate, authorized, and socially accepted.

In the former section we have seen how the theory on political representation has broadened beyond electoral politics through works such as Saward (2009), that, focusing on the concept of ‘claims’ in political representation, has challenged elective representative claims as the only ones that can be accepted as having democratic legitimacy and suggesting the consideration of non electoral representation, as that exercised by NGOs or interest groups, as legitimate democratic representation. Our approach to the study of symbolic representation participates in this broadening of the theorization of the concept of political representation, by adopting a discursive focus on symbolic representation, which allows us to included broader sets of actors claiming to represent than the traditional elected representative.

3. The symbolic representation of ‘gender’

Gender as the principal

The use of discursive politics perspectives to study symbolic representation is particularly important when approaching issues of gender equality, where the construction of differentiated and hierarchical social roles for women and men is a key element in the creation and perpetuation of inequalities. Feminist literature has extensively studied the different constructions of an unequal gender order, involving values, practices and institutions that contribute to create and maintain inequalities in societies, and the assignment to women and men of roles that show a different power hierarchy between them, where men have normally enjoyed a privileged position – with variations depending on how gender intersects with other inequalities. The meanings assigned to women and men are then expressed through different images or discourses that are not ‘simply given’ but rather socially constructed. These images and discourses have a meaning at the symbolic level. The image of the pregnant Spanish minister inspecting the troops that has accompanied us along this chapter is a gendered
symbol. It suggests meanings – and in this case unsettles beliefs – that are associated with women and men, their social relationship, and socially constructed roles.

Gender, or women and men as socially constructed, is the principal that is represented in political discourse according to our definition of symbolic representation. Women and men are important symbols in politics, and important political symbols in politics and public policies are to a large extent gendered. Political symbols suggest meanings, feelings, and values that are ‘appropriate’ to the principal, that is, in this case, to women and men. In the representation of the nation, for instance, argues Puwar (2004: 6), ‘Women feature as allegorical figures that signify the virtues of the nation. It is men who literally represent and defend the nation’. The symbolic association of women and men with specific characteristics and roles carries political consequences for women and men, mostly to the advantage of the male subjects. As Carol Pateman writes ‘the political lion skin has a large mane and belonged to a male lion; it is a costume for men. When women finally win the right to don the lion skin it is exceedingly ill-fitting and therefore unbecoming’ (Pateman 1995 quoted in Puwar 2004: 77). This appropriateness of the agent to the principal, and its implications for gender, is also a reason why we stick to the concept of symbolic representation.

By defining gender as our principal, our definition of symbolic representation partly differs from Pitkin’s. While we take a concept as a principal of symbolic representation, Pitkin tends to refer to individual citizens as the principal of representation. The concept of gender has been explored in the literature as a social status, a relation, a process, a performance. We are interested in the symbolic representation of gender as a constructed relation between women and men, we want to explore how gender relations are expressed in the discourse, and what are women and men symbols of. In this respect our conceptualisation of symbolic representation does not explore the political representation of individual women and men. However, on the point about symbolic representation as representation of individuals, Pitkin’s concept of symbolic representation seems more easily open to multiple interpretations. It is not so clearly referring to individuals representing other individuals, as it is the case for her concepts of descriptive and substantive representation. Pitkin argues on the one hand that human beings can be symbols representing particular concepts, as it is the case of a king symbolising the unity of a state. On the other hand she also states: ‘Repraesentare means to make present something that is not in fact present. A piece of cloth may in that sense represent a vast power complex, or the Stars and Stripes the United States of America’ (Pitkin 1972: 92). Since it is not only about people representing other people, symbolic representation could be understood as a matter of political symbolism only, rather than as a question of political representation. Yet, the added value of maintaining Pitkin’s definition of symbolic representation consists in the potential this concept offers beyond the political value as such of a symbol. It maintains the notion of men and women being represented, not only formally, descriptively and substantially, but also symbolically. More importantly, this representation at the symbolic level cannot be seen independently of and is related to the other dimensions of representation, especially descriptive and substantive representation. Symbolic representation, in our view, can be about discursive agents symbolically representing particular relations between people such as gender relations, and thereby representing these people.
The discursive construction of gender

In matters of symbolic representation, the question that is generally asked is whether there is an adequate representation of the principal. In our discursive analysis of gender as the principal the question is how women and men are discursively constructed and what that actually means for women and men principals. In particular, in our research we ask questions such as: how are women and men constructed in political discourses? By what symbols are they represented? What do these symbols tell? What meanings do women and men suggest or evoke? Subsequently, can we say that they are sufficiently or adequately represented?

A great part of the literature on the symbolic construction of women and men and the implications of this construction of meanings for women and men’s lives can be found in studies on gender and nations (Nagel 1998; Yuval Davis 1997; Yuval Davis and Anthias 1989). These studies focus on how nations or states symbolize women and men, and what the creation, perpetuation, and use of gendered symbols means for the (re)production of a gender order. For example they show how, due to their physical strength and the social value assigned to it, men get awarded a more important role of defending the country while women are constructed as the supportive citizens (Yuval Davis 1997; Yuval Davis and Anthias 1989). They show how the male role in the construction and maintenance of nations and states is typically metonymic, it is, ‘men are contiguous with each other and with the national whole’ (McClintock 1995: 355). And they discuss how women are more easily framed as symbols of nationhood in passive and controlled roles of ‘volksmoeder’ – mother of the people – used by white settlers colonizing South Africa – as an icon of motherhood, gender containment and domestic service (McClintock 1995). This focus on social constructions of gender and their political meaning serve us as an important background literature and starting point to introduce the symbolic construction of gender and will therefore be discussed more at length in chapter two on the theory of symbolic representation.

Feminist accounts on state and nation not only show how women and men have been symbolically constructed according to particular roles and values, but they also shed new light on Pitkin’s assumption that symbols do not resemble the principal they represent, like is the case with descriptive representation where parliament mirrors the composition of society and in that respect resembles it. Pitkin underlines that symbolic representation is not an issue of resemblance. The fact that symbols might share some characteristics with the principals they represent is misleading. While there might be some resemblance, like in the case of the US flag where the different stars represent the different states of the federation, we cannot speak of real resemblance, Pitkin (1972:94) argues. Symbols might be proxies for what they represent, no more. This argument can be put into question. The issue is what resemblance means, and what we understand under the evocative or suggestive capacity inherent to symbols. What do we actually see, hear or feel, when being confronted with symbolic representation? Meaning. To what extent could specific meanings ascribed to women and men imply a relationship of resemblance between the symbol as an agent and the principal it stands for? Women or men stand for something in symbolic representation. The characteristics
ascribed to men and women gives that particular meaning to men and women as symbols in politics. All the qualities and values associated with Marianne as a woman are also assigned to France – though they are not the only ones. Similarly, the discursive construction of men and women symbolically portrays – and represents – them in a specific way. There is therefore a resemblance between the agent and the principal in symbolic representation, at the level of gender as a social construction and the meaning it has. In that respect symbolic representation is not only an issue of resemblance, though this resemblance is an important contributor to (re)producing gender power structures and relations.

In sum, we are interested in what is symbolised and how in policy discourses, what feelings and beliefs are men and women meant to evoke, what symbolic constructions of gender mean for the prevailing gender relations, and what are the implications of symbolic constructions of gender for political representation in its multiple dimensions, that is relating symbolic with descriptive and substantive representation. The bottom line is what men and women symbolise, on the one hand, and what symbolises them, on the other hand. In this respect we study the symbolic representation of gender, rather than the symbolic representation of individual women. The theoretical foundation of the book is gender and the aim consists in exploring gender relations, the social construction of women and men, and especially of one sex as compared and in relation to another, addressing its intersections with other inequalities where relevant.

4. This book

This book explores the symbolic representation of gender by taking a discursive turn to the issue. It starts from Pitkin’s definition of symbolic representation, and draws its borders to adapt it to a concept of symbolic representation whose agent is discourse and whose principal is gender. In this respect it circumscribes a topic such as symbolic representation that is extremely broad, limiting its analysis to gender and policy discourses, tackling some of the functions of symbolic representation, and relating when possible the symbolic with the descriptive and substantive political representation. In this way the book will add some pieces in the puzzle of symbolic representation, a subject that has been so far understudied in research on gender and politics.

Chapter two further unravels the concept of symbolic representation relating it to the construction of gender. To situate the theme, it places the symbolic representation of gender as we defined it in this introduction within the broader literature on symbolic representation. It draws attention on how symbolic representation involves the activity of creating and giving shape to symbols and how this in its turn implies the constructed nature of symbols. Focusing on the construction of men and women, that is gender, the chapter sets out how symbolic representation creates gendered meaning through resemblance and how this relates to
questions of power. It then introduces different functions of symbolic representation, with particular reference to the functions of identity, legitimacy and political control.

Chapter three introduces the discursive turn in the study of symbolic representation. The argument made is that the importance of discursive politics in matters of symbolic representation is often underestimated, and that it should especially be addressed when analysing gender equality. The chapter addresses how symbolic representation does not only contain a visual, but also a discursive dimension, to be found in frames, underlying norms, and values that are expressed in policy discourses. It argues that a discursive analysis of the symbolic representation of women and men in public policies reveals the construction of categories of people who are unequally ranked. This imbalance in symbolic representation in turn affects the descriptive and substantive representation of women and men, and may further inequalities. The discursive analysis of symbolic representation in this book is based on the use of the qualitative methodology of critical frame analysis, which will be detailed in the chapter.

Chapter four is a first of a series of three, each of which tackles one of the functions of symbolic representation set out in chapter two. Chapter four discusses the function of identity construction related to symbolic representation. It theorises the concept of identity understood as a construction of specific social roles and relates it to the construction of unequal gender roles in the public and private spheres. For this purpose it analyses public policies on the organisation of labour and other care issues in the European Union.

Chapter five turns to the second function of symbolic representation that will be considered in the book, that is legitimacy. It analyses how symbolic representation shapes, produces and reproduces legitimacy of the political system and existing social order. For analysing the function that symbolic representation plays for the legitimacy of the political system we explore the issue of intimate citizenship with particular reference to public policies on partnership and reproductive rights in the cases of Belgium, Italy, The Netherlands and Spain. The chapter discusses the extent to which the symbolic dimension of the subjects constructed in the discourse legitimises the system, but also the existing social order based on particular representations of what a family or a citizen is supposed to be.

In Chapter six we focus on the function of symbolic representation related to political control. We theorise the function of political control and relate it to the issue of gender based violence. Through the construction of policies on gender based violence – including domestic violence, sexual harassment, trafficking, and honour crimes – we analyse how polities exercise political control over men’s and women’s lives and their personal integrity. The cases selected are policy discourses on gender violence in Belgium, Italy, the Netherlands and Spain. We discuss the consequences of this construction of political control for the symbolic representation of women and men.

After having dealt with the various functions of symbolic representation in the previous chapters and how they impact upon issues of gender equality, we now turn more explicitly to the other dimensions of political representation and discuss how they relate to symbolic representation. Chapter seven connects descriptive to symbolic representation.
While, according to Pitkin, both in symbolic and in descriptive representation agents were ‘standing for’ principals, the research since mostly looked at descriptive representation. Drawing on the example of Belgium, we more precisely look into measures to enhance the (numerical) presence of women in politics and their discursive constructions, and analyse their meaning for symbolic representation. We analyse how measures such as gender quotas are both symbols of the eradication of maleness of politics and symbols for equality, but often also merely symbolic measures in the struggle for gender equality, and the ambivalent relationship between descriptive and symbolic representation.

Chapter eight builds upon the previous one in that descriptive representation is generally seen as a means to enhance substantive representation. It takes a more theoretical turn and approaches substantive representation from a discursive perspective. Discussing the need to approach substantive representation from a discursive perspective, it analyses the triangular relationship between descriptive, substantive and symbolic representation. Both chapter seven and eight differ a bit from the previous ones, in that they do not only focus on discursive constructions as the agent, but also on women and men as the agent of descriptive or substantive representation.

Chapter nine looks into the relationship between political representation and power. Political representation, be it descriptive, substantive, or symbolic, is ultimately an issue of power. A power that, in Foucaultian terms, is perpetuated and normalised through hegemonic discourses. A power that, though diffused in society and reproduced through discourses and practices to the extent that it becomes almost invisible, should not make us overlook the question: which actors hold the hegemonic power to use and shape political symbols according to their perspectives, values, interests and privileges? How do hegemonic groups use their power for framing the symbolic representation of gendered principals? And what are the consequences of this power that is reflected in the discourse of public policies, for the political representation of women?

The concluding chapter ten wraps up the major issues of the book within a broader reflection on the relation between gender, inclusiveness and legitimacy of contemporary European democracies, and the role and importance of symbolic representation within this setting. Drawing on Bacchi’s (2009) notion of reflexivity, it questions the intrinsic value of symbolic representation and pleads for a more conscious approach of symbolic representation in current politics and policies and an increased attention for the symbolic dimension of representation in scholarly work on the broader issue of representation.

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