CHAPTER 13

Fiery Metaphors in the Public Space: Celebratory Culture and Political Consciousness around the Peace of Utrecht

Willem Frijhoff

In the evening of 13 April 2013, the Tercentenary celebration of the Peace Treaty of Utrecht was inaugurated by a sensational event that took place on top of the A2 motorway and was finished by spectacular fireworks. Three centuries earlier, fireworks also marked the end of the war and the conclusion of the Utrecht Peace in the principal cities of the former belligerent nations. Why fireworks? Why the visual representation of fire as the zenith of such a political celebration? There are some good reasons for this practice. While massive public rejoicings usually feature open-air festivities visible on a large scale, the popular success of fireworks is rooted above all in the social and cultural anthropology of the element ‘fire’. The use and experience of fire and its (changing) meanings in ancient and non-Western societies as well as in Western civilization have been at the core of a long series of seminal works from various disciplines in the humanities and social sciences, not to speak of occultism and esotericism.

For these authors, fire is the ultimate proof of resistance, truth and veracity. Moreover, as a spectacular, moving form of lightning, fire is also a symbol of


energy, passion and love, of the desire for purity and the aspiration to gain access to higher, intangible values. Finally, as an airy element fire is a metaphor for transition and transformation. Fire graphically represents the sparkling victory of the world of light over the universe of darkness. Fire elucidates the dangers and destroys the past, leaving behind a fertile soil where soon new shoots emerge to shape a fresh, new world. Therefore fire embodies hope, and an entirely new beginning. It brings the spectators together in a sense of redemption and of community without divisions or borders. The fascination with fire, either as a danger or as a source of hope, has therefore firm anthropological roots that explain why mass festivities generally include some form of performance in which fire plays a determinant role.

The best known and most universally appreciated of those performances involve fireworks.\(^3\) Independently of the idiosyncrasies of various human civilizations, fireworks are considered everywhere the ultimate celebratory performance, in the East as well as in the West. Fireworks technology, pyrotechnics, came to the West from the East, from China in particular. It probably spread from Italy (Vicenza 1379) and the Holy Roman Empire (Vienna 1438, Constance 1506, Nuremberg 1536) to France and the Netherlands. At first it served military aims and it has long continued to do so, but in the second half of the sixteenth century the first recreational fireworks emerge in our sources, in particular in our visual evidence. As early as the last quarter of the sixteenth century images of fireworks were published, and soon no public fireworks were performed without a pictorial publication of their exhibition.

Yet fire had been playing its role in public celebrations or recreational activities for centuries before this time, mainly in the form of bonfires (the *pektonnen* of the Dutch), an older, fixed variety of fiery performance that could be lighted without an explosive ignition.\(^4\) But once adopted in Western Europe during the sixteenth century, recreational or celebratory fireworks have taken root and developed their own modalities characteristic either of the hierarchical or of the more popular organization of the societies of Europe. Fireworks could serve to sing the praises of the highest authority of the state and their victories, as well as celebrate the unity and cohesion of the community. Over the past centuries there has virtually been no major event or festivity in Western Europe that was not finished, solemnly concluded, and anchored
