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The Politics of Non-Flammability

From the perspective of a fire extinguisher questioning its own existence

E-Pub version

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This text was written as a script to be uttered by a
fire extinguisher as an artwork

First act

The politics of non-flammability is the political order that has made, developed and obliged me in the political, in the social realm, and as I now realise, so much of what is given in the cultures of our Western social realms, is what I am to counteract. I feel obliged, to question myself, my function of extinguishing and what it works for, which I shall henceforth do.

What I am to counteract with the function of my existence, can be illustrated with an accident of culture, language, and more specifically with sayings and proverbs. Think of sayings such as ‘catching fire’. Something starts burning. Here fire, A, is something that comes into existence by ‘grabbing’ around itself, and that which is ‘caught’, B, will burst into flames, thus feeding and sustaining the fire. I am to prevent the hold that A could get on B; to generate a deceiving mist, depriving all coordination to grab. I am the conductor of the dodge. Why? Because fire always encompasses ‘playing with fire’ which means

to work with something that is considered dangerous, something that could harm. Or worse: one could lose control, and all order is lost for the simple reason that – once the play has passed – fire spreads ‘als een lopend vuurtje’, or in English ‘as a walking fire’. This means that what is on fire, will rapidly spread the fire which had caught it. This is used to imply trends; things that spread because they matter. It is ‘hot’, to use another accident of fire as metaphor. Fire here is that which spreads by means of the fuel which so does ‘catch fire’. Fire is thrown at the fuel, and the fuel catches it thus combusting. Vice versa, one could say, in order to catch fire one needs an instance of ‘je hand in het vuur steken’, or in English to ‘hold one’s hand in the fire’: being convinced of something. This implies the danger and pain but also the perseverance that comes with acting towards something that does not merely coincide with the status quo; with what is considered to be normal. Fire here, is the necessary bridge to that which is new. It implies the great deal of effort that goes into reaching that new. Once reached, there can be ‘de klap op

de vuurpijl’, or in English ‘the blast of the fire work’: a climax or total surprise of change – used to imply something radically unexpected or new which is proposed by the bang of fire. It does also, semantically, quite clichéd, relate to the tradition of fireworks on New Year’s Eve; blowing away the old and thus making space for the new to come.

This transitory phase is also expressed by ‘de vuurdoop’, or the ‘trial by fire’: which is to endure something that is hard; and that which is hard is the change metaphorised by fire. This saying is used to imply the extreme difficulty of change sublimated in a ‘rite de passage’. Thus there is an act, the act of fire, which allows things to change; which allows energy locked in something to be re-released. This ‘new’ proposed by fire does also bring warmth understood quite obviously as ‘sitting next to the fire’: being on top of things – used to imply that being close to change, allows you to benefit from it. Thus, sitting far away from fire, or working against it (*for* the locked energy of the status quo)

means one has to sit in the cold for only the re-release of energy generates the heat of fire. While sitting close to the fire, it allows one to have ‘een ijzer in het vuur’, or in English ‘having an iron on the fire’: having a plan not yet known to the outside world. Using an ‘iron’ in this saying, I think, is used to imply the constituent factor of heat produced by fire; and especially how it produces change in stiff, fixed and otherwise cold things. In other words, the iron cannot be forged without fire. Hence, a cold iron will stay the same solidified block of unified material without the heat of fire. The same goes for the saying that ‘when fire is applied to stone it cracks’: that which appears rock solid, can be broken by fire – used to imply that even things set in stone, to use another saying, are not eternal nor indestructible. However, there is a factor needed, fire, that constitutes the change of unified stone into (multiple) *new* bodies. It is about seeing the possibilities, when they are non-present at first sight. Semantically quite close is ‘having a pot on the fire’: something is cooking – often used to negatively imply something is

boiling up while of course things *need* to boil for them to be nourishing. The reason this could be interpreted negatively, is due to the risk of spoiling, hence ‘pouring oil on a (open) fire’: lighting the tensions – used to imply to ‘make things worse’ than they apparently already are. This fear for change is a fear for antagonising a situation – problematising it. ‘Het vuur aan de schenen leggen’, or in English, ‘firing close to the shins’: to put pressure on a situation – often implies to confront political actors through public manifestations. What starts at the shins, by grabbing around itself, easily ends up at someone ‘being on fire’ which literally means to be burning, however it is used to imply being very ‘heated’ by a situation but also that someone is running warm; that someone is on a ‘spree’; doing a surprisingly continuously good job. This qualification might be given when someone is going ‘to go through fire and water’ – even risking getting burned for the sake of something of a greater good. This saying used to imply the extent to which one can go to help someone or something that is of importance.