

MEDIA & CRIME

CATHARSIS IN SERBIA

WHO IS READY FOR TEARDROPS?

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Appealing for something like catharsis in Serbia, or expecting it, is not only in vain, it is also a specific way to renounce confronting the past.

If only we could cry well our tears! The idea that a strong emotional catharsis can bring a freeing relief and moral liberation is not a new one, of course. Christianity is simply obsessed by this idea. Although Christian catharsis is oriented towards God, when manifested in public it communicates via a human being-intercessor (priest). Testimonies of intermediaries are nowadays part of church history. Namely, a big number of saints have reached their status through catharsis. Their sins were the precondition for catharsis. Without these sins their experience of revelation and of finding of the only true path would also not be so convincing.

For centuries now catharsis has been one of the main criteria for the existence of the human soul. It is interesting how persistently rejected is the idea that catharsis is a consequence of certain weakness, i.e. of emotional over-sensitiveness. By definition, only strong personalities can experience genuine catharsis, those who seem to us to be powerful and unbreakable. Mentally handicapped persons, women and children are not eligible for experiencing catharsis. (They manifest catharsis as hysteria). Accordingly, crybabies cannot experience deep sorrow.

Peoples, "big" and "small"

There are similar stereotypes in regard to peoples. There are peoples which are eligible for catharsis and those which are not. Namely, apart from historic and non-historic peoples there are also peoples who are earnest and those who are not. According to their own general conviction Serbs are, no doubt – an earnest people. According to ruling Serb criteria, earnest peoples are also: Germans, Russians and Jews. Other peoples are either completely non-earnest or at a so far distance and different that this can be no matter of serious discussion. For instance: the Japanese. By all probability they could join the rare, earnest peoples, but what prevents them is Asian collectivism and mass production. Earnest peoples are eligible for enormous, collective, historic catharsis. After that they continue to live and work within completely new historic frameworks. Thus they become not only more experienced, but also wiser and stronger. Defeat, too, is no doubt an introduction to some sort of catharsis. If it is acknowledged, of course.

The Germans are the best example of a people who experienced huge defeat, which provoked a chain of catharsis. The Germans were defeated, and they were guilty, so that the natural consequence was – catharsis. This rule applies only to earnest peoples. The Italians have also experienced defeat, and they were also guilty, but they did not experience any catharsis. The Jews, according to Serb conviction, experienced catharsis of a completely different type – after holocaust they found out that they must take their own future completely into their own hands. Their guilt was of a completely different nature: they were unprepared for their executioners. The Russians, however, are a special case. They had no need for catharsis because they were simultaneously both victims and executioners. Serbs have a weakness for Russian victims, particularly those which were caused by German aggression. Sufferings under Stalin and communist terror can in a way be justified by a successful construction of a powerful and dangerous state. This certainly impresses a small people to which the Russians have always been reliable allies.

In Russian culture the phenomenon of catharsis is deeply rooted. Catharsis as a means for personal purification and curing seems to be part of a specific nineteenth-century Russian ideology. Spiritual and physical trembling, strong visions, instantaneous loss of consciousness and memory, the feeling of fear and irreplaceable loss – all this is a big epileptic experience which with Dostoevsky is not only personal experience but also a specific state of mind of the soulful Russian. How this soulfulness came to live with the destruction of millions of human beings, both own compatriots and those across the border, is still a true mystery for many Serbs.

Culprits and models

What is the status of catharsis in Serbia today? Does somebody still hope for it? Are there those who

resolutely reject it? What does catharsis in Serbia imply? Was it experienced through bringing Milosevic down from power?

Generally speaking, catharsis is consistently rejected by all those who think Serbia has no more responsibility than other peoples for the wars which were waged in the territory of former Yugoslavia from 1991 to 1999. Among them a smaller portion is ready to accept catharsis, if all the other peoples who took part in the war do the same. So, there would be a kind of "agreed" collective catharsis which would instantaneously lead to overall remorse and reconciliation. That Serbia needs catharsis, as an efficient instrument for establishing moral order and beginning of general reconciliation, think those who are ironically labeled as "worldlings". It is a little awkward that a basically religious instrument promote people who are mainly atheists. It must be that reading Dostoevsky left deep traces among the non-religious ones, too.

The idea that catharsis can be channeled and modeled like a strong instrument of social reconciliation and progress came to Serbia from two directions. One model of catharsis is the German one, the other the South-African one. Of course, there is no model of German catharsis. Contemporary German experience and the attitude towards World War II German crimes are a consequence of, on the one hand, a radical process of denazification and on the other hand of a change of generations and the feeling of guilt on part of the children born after the war ended. This German feeling of guilt for what the previous generations committed looks like being very, very serious, German. There is no fooling, no superficiality. Contemporary Germans know very well what was committed in Auschwitz and Dachau. When in Serbia there is the request that for Serbia there should be the same criterion of guilt (catharsis) as for Germany, one disregards the basic facts related to the scope, planning, and consciousness on committed crimes. To compare the crimes committed by the Nazis with the Serbs' war-time experience simultaneously makes the Nazi crimes more relative. This entire story, and the comparison with the German experience with guilt and catharsis, look like being extremely artificial and unendurable. There is also some subdued boasting and sensuality in this rhetoric – "We and the Germans"!

Another search for catharsis comes from South Africa. The model, of course, is the famous Commission for Truth and Reconciliation, lead by bishop Desmond Tutu. When Milosevic was overthrown, the idea that Serbia could take the same path came from the leading politicians. Vojislav Kostunica, the then President of Serbia, established by decree the Serbian Commission for Truth and Reconciliation. There are a few key differences between the situation in Serbia in 2000 and South Africa in the eighties. First, in Serbia there was no compromise or agreement among the opposing parties. The defeated party agreed to withdraw only after there was violence and a kind of coup, as well as because it refused to be disciplined by the main armed pillars of government. Nobody among the representatives of the old regime has ever admitted to be responsible for any crime. Representatives of the old regime continued to control big parts of the judiciary, the police and the army. In such a situation the new authorities had neither the political strength nor organizational capabilities to initiate a process of facing the past, which is the precondition for any, even the smallest, catharsis.

Objectively speaking, the Commission in South Africa had huge powers not only because of its public role and influence but rather because it was also a significant instrument for exerting pressure upon the defeated regime. A few days after the first democratic elections Nelson Mandela was forced to make it possible for the Commission to grant amnesty to all those who publicly confessed the murders they had committed. (The old regime has given an ultimatum: either possibility of amnesty, or no elections). Thus the Commission has gained also undisputable judicial powers.

What in my view is the key difference between the Serbian and South-African commissions relates, however, not so much to historical, cultural, economic and political differences between these two countries as it does relate to the understanding of the essence and nature of the commissions' work. In contrast to the South-African Commission, the Serbian Commission was created as a theoretical and academic institution and not as a mass and practical organization which must basically engage in field activity, among the victims, culprits and witnesses. The idea that it is possible to reach any kind of catharsis through theoretical and historical work, even when engaging the most clever and the most honest of all people, looks extremely insane. The South African Commission for Truth and Reconciliation represented a genuine movement which encompassed several thousands of individuals. They were daily confronting throughout the country – at places where crimes were committed. This was an opportunity to face the past by the local, but also by the entire South-African community. The media, and particularly radio and television, reported every day on the confronting and confessions of culprits and victims. The entire nation, divided by historical racial and social trenches, was experiencing together the catharsis of truth. There were no ex cathedra or historical lectures, there was only deep and painful sincerity. Therefore it is not at all strange that this South African experience became popular worldwide. Here we have, at last, a success story where opening and sincerity can help to reach reconciliation. In South Africa were crying together over their destinies both the victims and executioners, the judges and witnesses.

Who in Serbia is ready for such an experience? Who is ready to drop a tear? Bora Jovic, Mihailo Markovic, Ivica Dacic? Are Legija and Rade Markovic ready to speak if in return they will be given amnesty? I strongly doubt it. In Serbia family members of those accused of most horrible crimes are openly threatening the journalists and members of nongovernmental organizations. And what was happening beyond Serbia? Not even the pictures of executions of unarmed Bosnian young man by the "Scorpions" did raise the need for remorse and confession. Appealing for something like catharsis in Serbia, or expecting it, is not only in vain, it is also a specific way to renounce confronting the past.

Turmoil

Children of outstanding Serbian politicians, police and army commanders, still do not demonstrate suspicion or guilt for what their fathers did in the last fifteen-odd years. Guilt is something you do not teach in schools. Or do you? Like the young Germans who learn today as well about Auschwitz or Dachau. Will the young Serbs one day learn about Srebrenica, Ovchara and Ibarska magistrala? Namely, just to remind – this, too, is a matter for a serious commission for truth and reconciliation.

Here, truth is still not curing. The truth is only dangerous, upsetting and unpleasant. Therefore catharsis definitely is not a topical Serbian issue.

The newest Rehabilitation Act speaks best on the mental and moral turmoil resulting from the obsession to remove the legacy of injustice with a stroke of a pen or a spontaneous spillout of sincerity. Of course, here comes also the need related to petit politics to be original and popular. In the way in which Serbia is facing the past there is still no recognition of anything that would resemble of either a genuine political turn or an individual catharsis.

In the Serbian national cuisine onion is very much present. We would expect it to be used for provoking tears which, as is generally known, cure. This motive, however, has been used in the literature long ago. The German Guenther Grass did this in the "Brass Drum". Here there is little confidence in tears, maybe mostly because there is so much lamenting. Years are passing in lying, lamenting and accusing everything and everybody for conspiracy against Serb national interests, and it will be impossible to make up for these years by any later remorse or tears.

Instead of catharsis Serbia today needs truth and justice which will manifest in suited and efficient court trials for crimes committed during the last fifteen years. This will best boost the entire society to face the past. After that, catharsis will get the original meaning related to the individual, and not the collective level.