

Historical-Critical Dictionary of Marxism

Catharsis

A: taḥīr. – E: catharsis. – F: catharsis. – R: katarsis. – S: catarsis. – C: kataxisi, jinghua 卡塔西斯, 净化

The word ‘catharsis’ derives from the Greek substantive *kátharsis* (purgation, cleansing, purification) and its verbal and adjectival forms *kathairein* and *katharós* (pure, clean). Its origin is unclear. ‘We don’t have an acceptable etymology’ (Frisk I, 752) The corresponding Latin term is *purgatio* (purification, exculpation; from *purus*, pure – related to the Greek *pur*, fire), thus also *purgatorium* (purgatory) with the complementary *purgamentum* (related to the Greek *kátharma*), for those purified (dirt, refuse; emission) and *purgamen*, signifying with a double sense both refuse and means of atonement. In Aristotle’s *Poetics*, the term ‘catharsis’, before any aesthetic meaning, refers to purification in a literal and metaphorical sense, ranging from the everyday act of washing oneself, to its metaphorical extension to ritual ‘cleansings’ after ‘spoiling’ or ‘sacrilege’ such as ‘impermissible presence at a holy place’ (cf. Dodds 1951).

Like all ‘important categories of the aesthetic’, catharsis does not proceed ‘from art into life, but rather, from life into art’ (Lukács, 1963/1981, 772). George Thomson, like Jacob Bernays (1857) before him, traced it back to magical-medical healing practices where it played the role of a ‘driving out of sickness for the renewal of life forces’ (1941, 402). The theatre that emerged in the context of the development of democracy with its cathartic function can be understood as a derivation from social integrative rituals. Where class-oppositions threaten to decompose the community, a ritual reconciliation is needed that does not deny misfortune, but still has

the task of shaping it as ‘*conditio humana*’ – by presenting it as something that all can encounter, regardless of their social position, it makes the ‘most abject inclined to believe themselves to be happy’ (Lessing, *Hamburgische Dramaturgie*, 78. Stück). Bertolt Brecht, on the other hand, posed himself the question of what can take ‘the place of fear and pity’ of the classical pair for the causation of ‘Aristotelian catharsis’ (*Über experimentelles Theater*, 1939/40, GA 22.1, 553). ‘Would it be possible, for example, to replace fear of destiny with desire for knowledge, to replace pity with cooperativeness?’ (554) Antonio Gramsci ascribes a decisive significance to the concept in terms of hegemony-theory: in order to attain to a role of social leadership, the ethico-political project of a group or class must be cleansed of corporative group-interests.

1. Nietzsche remarked regarding Aristotelian catharsis (which he named ‘pathological discharge’) that ‘the philologists do not really know if it should be ranked among medical or moral phenomena’ (*Geburt der Tragödie*, Nr. 22; KSA I, 142). If “tragic purification of passions” has passed over into numerous classes of aesthetic expressions, which are commonly used by any educated person and clear to no thinking person’, according to Bernays, this is not ‘the fault of the Stagirite’ (1857/1970, 138). For Aristotle, the son of a doctor, the medical meaning of catharsis was primary, above and beyond any moral reinterpretation: ‘those subject to ecstasy become calm by means of orgiastic songs just as sick people are cured by medical treatment’, a treatment that ‘applies cathartic means that drive out the sickness’ (Bernays, 143). While Aristotle renewed the Dionysian (cf. Thomson 1941) and Asclepian medical-magical meaning of catharsis (cf. Brunius 1966, 70 et sqq.) and

integrated it into his theory of poetry, **Plato** metaphorically adopted this conventional usage in order to describe the therapeutic role of philosophy, particularly regarding the relation of the soul to the body. In the *Phaedo*, **Socrates** argues that it is the love of wisdom (philo-sophia) that effects the cathartic moment that liberates the soul from the body (*Ph.* 69b); in the *Sophist*, the dialectic is represented as a way of purifying the soul of false opinions (*Sp.* 230 d). The philosopher is the privileged agent and location of such (self)-liberation. Originally related to a process of the body, **Plato's** catharsis aims at liberation from the prison of the body – a sense continued strongly in neo-Platonism (cf. **Plotinus**, *Enneads*, I, 2, §3.).

Plato wanted to cleanse the polis of poets and musicians along with instrument makers – *diakathairontes* [...] *en* [...] *polin* (*Politeia*, 399e) – because he was afraid of the ‘guardians’ becoming ‘more sensitive and soft’ due to the stimulation of sensual pleasures (387c) – a view with which **Nietzsche** agreed (*Menschl. Allzumenschliches*, I.212). **Aristotle**, on the other hand, ascribed to poetry an indispensable function in the maintenance of social relations. Tragedy, in distinction from comedy, is ‘*mimesis práxeos... di'éléou kai phóbou perainousa tèn tòn toioúton pathemátòn kátharsin*’ (*Poetics*, 1449b): approximately, ‘mimesis of action... arousing fear and pity, thereby accomplishing the catharsis of such states’. The mode of efficacy of catharsis (which appears in the *Poetics* only this one time) can be more precisely comprehended by referring to the *Politics*, where **Aristotle** explicitly refers to the *Poetics* (1341b, 40): ‘Under the influence of sacred music we see these people, when they use tunes that violently arouse the soul, being thrown into a state as if they had received medicinal treatment and taken a purge; the same experience then must come also to the compassionate and the timid and the other emotional people generally in such degree as befalls each individual of these classes, and all must undergo a purgation [*kátharsin*] and a pleasant feeling of relief’ (VIII 1342a, 8–15). **Aristotle** does not provide an answer to the

question of ‘what is purified of what’; interpretative dispute has been most intense where **Aristotle** is ‘silent’ (**Mittenzwei** 2001, 248). **Petrusevski** (1954) suggests that the phrase *pathemátòn kátharsin* (‘purgation of states of agitation’) is due to a scribe’s error in antiquity, whereas the phrase should be *pragmátòn sístasin* (‘composition of actions’), since **Aristotle** only recognised a musical catharsis (**Brunius** 1973, 269). **Fuhrmann**, on the other hand, argues that **Aristotle** provided the ‘necessary explanations in the lost second half’ of the *Poetics*, since ‘catharsis also plays a role in his theory of comedy’ (1982, 146 et sq.). The fact that it was a ‘pleasurable alleviation’ was proof for **Bernays** that **Aristotle** was ‘impatiently anxious to affirm for the theatre the character of a place of pleasure for the different classes of the public’ (1857/1970, 140).

2. Since the first half of the sixteenth century, there was hardly any year in which an edition or a commentary of **Aristotle's** *Poetics* was not published (**Bray** 1927/1974, 34), following its rediscovery in the West after the fall of Byzantium. In the Latin countries, in particular, it became an obligatory point of reference for claims to literary prestige. That this resulted in controversies is not surprising, for ‘the pleasure of different times’ were also different ‘according to the way in which people lived together’ (**Brecht**, *Kl. Organon*, Nr. 7; *GA* 23, 68). Thus **Lessing** claimed, against Pierre **Corneille** und **André Dacier**, that the correct understanding of catharsis was the definition of its efficacy as the ‘transformation of passions into virtuous capabilities’ (*Hamburg. Dramaturgie*, 78. Stück). **Lessing**, who integrated catharsis into his theory of ‘bourgeois tragedy [*bürgerliches Trauerspiel*]’, also coined the German translation of the Aristotelian concepts *phóbos* and *éleos* with ‘fear and pity [*Furcht und Mitleid*]’. These concepts, ‘encouraging error or simply false’ as translations (**Fuhrmann** 1982, 162), were conducive to the enlightenment transformation of the theatre into a ‘moral institution’ (**Bernays** 1857/1970, 136) that was useful for the development of a self-consciously emerging bour-

geois emancipation-movement. With the rise of modern bourgeois aesthetics (cf. **Williams** 1966, 27), the concept of catharsis came to signify generally the practice of self-regulation that aims to consolidate and stabilise the interiority of the modern subject against the disturbing effects of the impure external world. The audience's speculative identification with the characters of (high) 'Literature' and 'Art' would supposedly produce emotional stimulation followed by calming, leading to stabilisation of subjectivity. This 'homeopathic' interpretation was dominant in the nineteenth century and became the meaning of the term in everyday language; it strongly influenced, among others, **Freud's** and **Breuer's** early attempt in *Studies in Hysteria* to develop a clinical technique of catharsis as a therapeutic substitute for non-achieved abreaction, purging the patient of historically accumulated sources of psychic instability (1895).

3. Bertold **Brecht**, who developed a 'non-Aristotelian' drama oriented towards activating participation instead of passive *Einfühlung*, nevertheless accorded the 'greatest social interest' to catharsis (*GW* 15, 240; *GA* 22.1, 171). Insofar as the 'catharsis of Aristotle [...] is an ablation, that not only occurs in a pleasurable form but precisely for the goal of pleasure' (*GW* 16, 664; *GA* 23, 67), **Brecht** concurs. However, to the extent that this purification occurs 'on the basis of a peculiar psychical act, of empathy [*Einfühlung*] of the spectators for the acting people' – which means today an 'empathy for the individual of high capitalism' (15, 240 et sq.; 22.1, 171 et sq.) and, consequently, an 'incorporation of individuals in the order that dominates them (Weber 1997, 133) – it is not longer useful for **Brecht**. Just as parliament had become a 'talking shop', the theatre had become a 'feeling shop' (22.1, 171).

Brecht certainly does not deny the 'usefulness of Aristotelian effects', but does insist that their 'limits' must be recognised (15, 249; 22.1, 395). An Aristotelian type of play can be the spark that 'ignites the powder-keg'; if it is a case of 'a generally felt and acknowledged nuisance, the deployment of Aristotelian

effects is certainly to be recommended' (ibid.). That which had been the appropriate form of participation of the spectators in the ancient theatre (whose heroes saw themselves condemned to an unavoidable fate) has become obsolete in the 'scientific epoch'; in the place of empathy, there is now the critical attitude: 'a completely free, critical, thoughtful attitude of the spectator, based on purely earthly solutions of difficulties, is not a basis for a catharsis' (241; 172). When representations of human living together are delivered to a public 'that finds itself in the hardest class struggle' (ibid.), 'other types of contact' with the artwork must be sought (22.1, 174) 'that make possible – even organise – for the spectator a critically, possibly contradictory attitude both regarding the represented actions and also the representation' (15, 245; 22.1, 176). The 'purgation' that the critical spectators experience is one appropriate to the scientific epoch: the pleasure offered to them by the images of human living together in the theatre is in contact with the way in which they produce their life – something which, 'once unimpeded, could be the greatest of all pleasures' (16, 671; 23, 73).

The lack of contemporaneity of a merely individually experienced catharsis was also highlighted by Ernst **Bloch**: he sees the Aristotelian stimulation of fear and pity aiming at a behaviour that 'illustrates less rebelling against fate as the – however unwaveringly endured – suffering of it' (*Prinzip Hoffnung* Bd. 1, *GA* 5, 498). This type of pleasure was no longer really understandable already for the 'dynamic bourgeois society', and even less so now for the 'failing-victorious' who have agitated the 'sleep of the world' and whose 'defiance and hope' still grows in defeat (*Prinzip Hoffnung* Bd. 1, 499).

4. As Werner **Mittenzwei** has shown, **Lukács**, like **Brecht**, was interested in catharsis particularly because here for the first time the 'moment of the *effect* that the artwork prompts in those who imbibe art' was formulated. Thus, for both, catharsis is a 'general' 'category of aesthetics' (1968, 33), not merely limited to

tragedy. **Mittenzwei** summaries **Lukács's** approach in this way: 'The Aristotelian doctrine of catharsis, as purgation of passions, is a legacy in which the socialist society must be interested not only on the aesthetic side but also on the ethical side. The cathartic fundamental activity that can be aroused by life itself just as by art consists for Lukács in the explosion, in the moral crisis, which the aesthetic receiver experiences. Their subjectivity is so unsettled [*erschütterert*] in the face of determinate life facts or the art work that a transformation of humans, of their usual thoughts and feelings becomes possible' (**Mittenzwei** 1968, 34). In fact, **Lukács** ascribes to the artwork a 'shaking [*durchrütteln*] of subjectivity', which breaks up 'the previously fetishising contemplation of the world'; there is a type of shame about never having taken seriously in one's own life, in reality, something that is present so "naturally" in the composition' (1963/1981, 779). While, in this perspective, catharsis aims as a type of appeal to the individual to change his or her life, for **Brecht** it is a case of the transformation of society. Thus the necessity of taking a critical distance, the break with empathy – which **Lukács** misunderstands as a merely 'rationalised unsettling' (786).

5. Shortly before **Brecht** and **Lukács** began to argue over the meanings of realism in the Marxist *Weltanschauung* (cf. **Jameson** 1977), the imprisoned Antonio **Gramsci** had attempted to reclaim the concept of catharsis for a project of social transformation based upon the self-education and self-liberation of the organised working-class movement. Although it occurs only eight times in the *Prison Notebooks* (**Jouthé** 1990), catharsis is one of the central terms of **Gramsci's** political theory. It appears in a way similar to the concept of 'absolute historicism', 'like the tip of an iceberg' (**Thomas** 2004, 411). If **Lenin** sees political class-consciousness as growing not immediately on the economic terrain, but rather, out of the sphere of the interactions between entire classes or the relations of all classes and layers to the state and to the government, **Gramsci** develops this anti-econo-

mistic insight significantly further, arguing that the transition of a class from the corporative to hegemonic phase requires a 'catharsis' of their group egoisms (Q 10II, §6).

The former theatre-critic **Gramsci** develops his concept of catharsis initially in his engagement with **Croce's** aesthetics and, in particular, in the novel reading of the tenth Canto of **Dante's** *Inferno* that **Gramsci** develops in Notebook 4 (§78–§87) in May 1930 (cf. **Buttigieg** 1996; **Rosengarten** 1986). Whereas **Croce** had insisted upon distinguishing between the 'structure' and the 'poetry' of the *Divine Comedy* (cf. **Croce** 1940/1920, 53–73), **Gramsci** argues that they are dialectically implicated in moments of dramatic intensity. "The structural passage is not only structure [...] it is also poetry, it is a necessary element of the drama that has occurred" (Q 4, §78). Two years later, in the period in which he works most intensively to elaborate Marxism as a 'philosophy of praxis', **Gramsci** redeploys the term in order to subject to critique those intellectuals who are incapable of acting 'beyond the limits of their social group', because they are caught in a 'reformist conservatism' in which people are kept 'in the "cradle" and slavery' (Q 10I, §6). They 'conceive of themselves as the arbiters and mediators of real political struggles, as personifying the "catharsis" – the passage from the economic aspect to the ethico-political one – i.e. the synthesis of the dialectical process itself, a synthesis that they "manipulate" in a speculative fashion in their mind, measuring out the elements "arbitrarily" (that is to say passionately). This position justifies their less than total "engagement" in the real historical process and is, without doubt, very convenient. It is the position that Erasmus took with respect to the Reformation' (Q 10I, §6). For **Gramsci**, the cathartic event occurs in the struggles in the course of which a class previously held in subalternity makes itself capable of historical efficacy, finally flowing into the elaboration of new superstructures. In opposition to Henri **De Man**, who 'studies' the feelings of the people but does not feel with them, 'in order to guide them and conduce them to a catharsis of modern civilisation', in the 'relation between intel-

lectuals and the people-nation, between leaders and the led' there is the formation of an 'organic adhesion' 'in which the sentiment-passion becomes comprehension and thus knowledge' (Q 11, §67).

In a third development in the same period, **Gramsci** develops the concept of catharsis as a critique of Benedetto **Croce's** rigid separation of the 'philosophical' from the 'ideological'. Philosophy, for **Gramsci**, is 'the conception of the world that represents the intellectual and moral life (catharsis of a determinate practical life) of an entire social group conceived in movement and thus seen not only in its current and immediate interests, but also in its future and mediated interests' (Q 10I, §10; cf. Q 10II, §31i). Ideology, on the other hand, he here regards as 'any particular conception of groups inside the class that propose to help in the resolution of immediate and circumscribed problems' (ibid.). If the 'historicity' of philosophy means nothing more than its 'practical constitution' (Q 10II, §31), as **Gramsci** insists against **Croce**, then the 'catharsis of a determinate form of practical life' is not the capacity of individual philosophers, but is realised only in contact with an 'entire social group'. Philosophy therefore has a twofold 'symptomatic' role: on the one hand, it renews the cathartic event at a higher level of mediation, representing the prior achievements of a class's political practice in more coherent conceptual terms (or in a predicative mode, philosophy 'stands in' for the advance of the hegemonic constitution of a class upon the political terrain, as its conceptual indicator); on the other hand, insofar as philosophy is produced by the intellectual and moral life of a whole social group, it then immediately reacts back upon it to the extent that it also is an integral element of that intellectual and moral life, transforming the conditions of its own constitution through the active redefinition of the social and political terrain it strives to comprehend.

In a fourth moment, **Gramsci** uses this reformed concept of catharsis in order to signal the transition of an emergent social group from a subaltern economic-corporative phase to its self-constitution as a genuine class cap-

able of exercising social and political hegemony. Establishing 'the "cathartic" moment becomes [...] the starting-point for all the philosophy of praxis' (Q 10II, §6). Catharsis, as 'the passage from the purely economic (or egoistic-passional) to the ethico-political moment [...], also means the passage from 'objective to subjective' and from 'necessity to freedom'. Structure ceases to be an external force which crushes man, assimilates him to itself and makes him passive; and is transformed into a means of freedom, an instrument to create a new ethico-political form and a source of new initiatives' (ibid.). The philosophy of praxis is not concerned to exercise 'hegemony over subaltern classes', but, on the contrary, to encourage the subaltern classes 'to educate themselves in the art of government', thus making 'the ruled intellectually independent from the rulers'; it aims to open up a new terrain with them on which they progress to 'consciousness of their own social being, their own strength, their own tasks, their own becoming' (Q 10II, §41xii). When such an ideological terrain is elaborated through the 'realisation of a hegemonic apparatus' capable of determining a 'reform of consciousness and of methods of knowledge', it is simultaneously 'a fact of knowledge, a philosophical fact' (Q 10II, §12). The cathartic moment thus represents for **Gramsci** 'a formative element of historical capacity to act, promoting it and promoted by it' (**Haug** 2006, 126) – the moment in which the working classes begin to 'rid [themselves] of all the muck of ages' (*MECW* 5, 46).

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Aesthetics, attitude, Brechtianism, class-consciousness, class in itself/for itself, coherence, economism, empathy, ethical-political, Greek antiquity, hegemonic apparatus, hegemony, heretic, historicism (absolute), ideology-theory, inner world/external world, intellectual, philosophy of praxis, realism, speculation, subalternity, superstructure, theatre, the tragic.

Ästhetik, Brecht-Linie, Einfühlung, ethisch-politisch, griechische Antike, Haltung, Hegemonialapparat, Hegemonie, Historizismus (absoluter), Ideologietheorie, Innenwelt/Außenwelt, Intellektuelle, Ketzler, Klasse an sich/für sich, Klassenbewusstsein, Kohärenz, Ökonomismus, Philosophie der Praxis, Realismus, Spekulation, Subalternität, Superstruktur, Theater, Tragisches.