CHAPTER TWO

VILLAGE GATHERINGS: THE POLITICS OF REPRESENTATION

Creating the New Folk Culture

Igra kolo sve partizan,
All partisans dance the kolo,
Srbin, Hrvat i Musliman.
A Serb, a Croat and a Muslim.
Svi narodi veselo,
All nations are merry,
veselo je sve selo.
All the villages make merry.
Socijalizam mi gradimo,
We are building socialism,
ničju pomoć ne tražimo.
And do not ask for any help.

(Nedeljković, unpublished manuscript)

The Village Gatherings, an event at which female singers began performing on stage and which played an important role in the representation of socialist femininity, were a part of the larger project of Yugoslav cultural policy. The political agenda of progress and modernization was directed at eliminating national differences, by building a concept of a shared Yugoslav identity based on economic development and equality, tolerance among nations, gender balance and equal laws and rights for all citizens (Sekulić, Massey, and Hodson 1994: 95). Official narratives claimed that existing differences would vanish under the “supremacy of the proletariat” (Echols 1981: 4).

Official cultural policy also aimed to achieve a balance among the ethnic and regional diversities by creating a multicultural canon of culture, which was represented as a joint product and reflection of all working people (peasants, workers and the intelligentsia). Party officials emphasized that the term ‘national’ had a different meaning from that of the past when it referred more specifically to the peasants.¹ The socialist notion of the term narodno (which actually means ‘people’s’ or ‘popular’) included the rural population, workers and so-called ‘honest intelligentsia’ and therefore the inhabitants of both villages

¹ In contrast to the connotation that this term had in the nineteenth century, especially in relation to romantic nationalism, during the socialist period it was used to propagate the homogeneity of the people and the ‘undifferentiated’ masses (Buchanan 2006: 35).
and cities (Marjanović 1959: 108; Nedeljković 1962: 100; Nedeljković 1968: 45). In this way, the concept of national culture changed, since the ‘new folk culture’ (narodna or pučka kultura) now included all people (all working masses). The concept of musical folklore was conceptualized in the same way:

Musical folklore is the music created and passed on from generation to generation by wider layers of working people, who do so in accordance with their natural artistic instinct, disregarding the learned conventions of music theory. (Žganec 1962: 6)

The creation of new folk culture was part of the broader ‘modernization project’ that was characteristic of socialist societies in general. The socialist ideology was based on Marxist-Leninist notions of ‘progress’ and ‘improvement’ of the entire society, economically as well as spiritually. As Deema Kanef claims, the development program needed a display to show that social transformation had occurred, and the field of folk culture was one public field where the state commitment to progress was demonstrated (Kaneff 2004: 140).

On the other hand, the traditional heritage was seen as an amusement and a form of popular entertainment, and not as a real threat to the state’s multicultural politics. Customs, music and dances were regarded as part of people’s everyday lives, deeply rooted in their lifestyles and mentality:

But church gatherings (crkveni sabori), slava, and various entertaining village dances from ancient times are not only the outcome of backward influences or the result of a wider agenda for their preservation, but in great part a desire for amusement and expression. (Archive of Yugoslavia, League of Communists of Yugoslavia, hereafter: AJ. 142, The Report on the Plenary of SSRNJ – Socijalistički savez radnog naroda Jugoslavije or the Socialist Alliance of Working People of Yugoslavia 1959, F-616)

As Mirjana Laušević also points out, since it had a local rather than a national (ethnic) character, traditional rural music had never been considered dangerous to Yugoslav supracultural ideology and so was not placed under strict control (Laušević 1996: 119). The officials’ main intention was to offer new, ‘contemporary’ content created in accordance with socialist demands, but in connection with the ‘existing cultural forms.’ The ‘artistic’ presentation of folk heritage was intended to improve traditional culture and society as a whole. Party leaders asserted that the new folk culture should be represented in a ‘cultured way’ as confirmation of the society’s overall development.