Ana Hofman

*Staging Socialist Femininity: Gender Politics and Folklore Performance in Serbia*


Based on her doctoral dissertation at the Graduate School for Intercultural Studies, University of Nova Gorica, Slovenia, Ana Hofman’s *Staging Socialist Femininity* is a concise, theoretically informed monograph on female singing groups in southeast Serbia, focusing on their activities within the amateur folkloric institution Village Gatherings (*Seoska okupljanja*) from the early 1970s to the mid-1990s. Framing the narrative with Yugoslavia’s socialist past, Hofman takes a fresh look into the music culture of rural Serbia from the perspectives of gender and cultural policy. The book reads like an extended essay on socialism, blending fieldwork and archival research with engaged theoretical discussion and reflexive commentary. Without explicitly addressing the issues of post-socialist transformations, Hofman ambitiously treats her research site—relatively limited in scope—as a case study for re-examining tenets of East European (music) scholarship dominated by the static terms of official/unofficial discourse.

Loosely following the chronology of Yugoslavia’s nation-building after WWII, the narrative is organized in four chapters, each employing varied source material: interviews, public policy documents, audio and video illustrations, and extensive literature. In the introductory chapter, Hofman uses conventional methodology of reconstructing the past from scholarly sources and recollections of elderly women, living in a relatively insulated cluster of villages in the Niš valley. It offers valuable insights into important customs, rituals and song repertoires (*lazarice, kraljice, Đurđevdan, sedenjke*), dating back to the pre-socialist period. Given the accelerated pace of modernization and social change since the 1950s, most of the customs eventually ceased to be performed but they remain known in the wider area of Serbia and its environs. In Chapter Two, self-management and cultural-artistic societies provide a backdrop for tracing the growth of new folk culture in the 1960s-1970s, and within it, the 1973 inception of the festival-competition Village Gatherings. Issues of representation raised by institutional efforts to preserve folk culture through stage performance are complemented with intimate testimonials of singers and local organizers, all emphasizing strong communal ties, cooperative spirit, and pride fostered by public presentations of their heritage.

Chapter Three more substantively addresses Yugoslavia’s cultural policy and describes the repertoire of Village Gatherings to examine a set of binary perspectives (state /local, political/personal, etc.), emphasizing ambiguity rather than opposition. The final chapter articulates the issues previously raised in...
terms of new concepts of identity, subjectivity and self-representation, as female exclusion gives way to “performative negotiation.”

Ana Hofman is an astute observer, able to address details without losing sight of the big picture. She argues convincingly for the socioeconomic marginality of Yugoslav peasantry, whose culture, mostly in symbolic form, proved particularly exploitable by an assemblage of pop culture marketeers and nationalist ideologues throughout the 1990s. Rather than a one-dimensional reflection of the top-bottom dynamics of managed culture, Village Gatherings were “significant [and]... genuinely meaningful” in the lives of their participants (63). Diminishing government support for amateur activities, and rural communities in general, led to the cessation of Village Gatherings in the mid-1990s, coinciding with the onset of democratically elected (and economically impoverished) local leadership.

The book presents moving portrayals of community members’ struggles to keep pace with the changing times. Particularly valuable are insights into aspects of socialization for youth and for women, who responded enthusiastically to initiatives for amateur self-organizing. For women, Village Gatherings provided a reprieve from oppressive gender-based mores and the strictures of household life, and offered the possibility for social mobility that came along with their local, regional, and even international travel. As Hofman pointedly remarks, for them “socialism was not simply beneficial, it was emancipating” (109). In the private domain of home and family life, however, their individuality remained constricted. Gender equality, legally guaranteed and normatively encouraged, lived mainly in performative forms of social life, hence the “emancipatory potential” of the ideology that allowed it.

Appropriately, given the documentary and analytical emphasis on insiders’ experiences, numerous interview excerpts enhance the analytical value of subjectivity. Heavy reliance on personal experience, perhaps an inevitable trait of reflexive ethnography, at times provides for better poetic than historiographic reading. Occasionally, rapidly shifting historical perspectives without reference to specific time-periods and wordy theorizing require extra concentration in reading. Overall, however, Hofman’s engaging style compensates for the unintended effects of dialogical argumentation.

Informed analysts of Yugoslavia’s culture typically grapple with the difficulty of explaining the on-the-ground workings of official policies. Hofman successfully illuminates the articulation of policies as social action and personal expression in everyday life. Given the current preoccupation of ethnomusicologists with Balkan ethnopop transnationalism and hibridity, Hofman’s “retreat” to the village is a welcome reminder of our own disciplinary origins in