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Performing Continuity: Public Manifestations in Post-Socialist Serbia

This paper is a part of my PhD thesis,¹ based on the field research which was done from 2004 to 2006 in the area of Niško Polje in Southeastern Serbia. During the fieldwork, an interesting phenomenon was noticed: during the 1970s, as a result of the socialistic cultural policy, new practices emerged introducing in village cultural life public gatherings organized by the state. The stories encompassed by the fieldwork revealed that the manifestation called the *Village Gatherings (Susreti sela)* represented the corner stone of the cultural life in rural areas in Southeastern Serbia during the 1970s and 1980s. This manifestation began losing momentum after the break up of Yugoslavia, but under the leadership of Slobodan Milošević it still maintained existence. After October 5 Revolution in 2000 and the so-called “Democratic changes,” in many cities across Serbia, Cultural-Educational Associations, which were main organizers of this manifestation were closed down and the *Village gatherings* was claimed to be irrelevant and frivolous.

My approach had its foundation in the quantitative methodology, which considers the researched reality in a subjective and multidimensional way, created by personal

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interpretations. I also opted for the oral history method, which made it possible to keep a record of personal histories of my interlocutors, their points of view and interpretations of the past. People I have talked to were participants, local cultural workers and organizers of the *Village gatherings* in their villages. Some of them were well-known performers (singers, players, dancers) and members of local cultural organization (Cultural Centers – *Kulturni centri*, Cultural-Artistic Societies – KUDs – *Kulturno umetnička društva*).

An additional aspect of the applied methodological approach was the way my interlocutors created their memories of the past. Their stories, although they speaking about past, also acknowledge the present post-socialist reality, showing the dynamic of sentiments regarding the socialistic past – denial of the past on one hand, and nostalgia on the other: “The grey phase of transition, as jump between past and future constructed multiple images of the past, positive and negative, difficult and improving” (Creed 1999:224). This approach indirectly unveiled the strategies of remembering and reconstructing the past, which appeared to be a crucial issue in researching the narratives about the *Village gatherings*.

The discourses of my interlocutors expressed significant ambivalence. The discourses about the “old times” and a current moment defined as “new times” were particularly present in their narratives. The “old time” was remembered as a period of suffering because of the difficult life-style (*mučili smo se*), but at the same time as the time of harmony, cooperation and unity: „Anger, resignation and selective nostalgia for the socialist era seem more significant in defining the new subjectivities“ (Hann 2002:93). People glorified idyllic village life, as a time marked by friendship, togetherness and generally good relations among people (“We lived different at that time. Lots of things happened, my son, lots of things, it was wonderful.” *Drukčije se živelo tag, Bilo svasta, sine, to je bilo svasta, divota je bilo*). People particularly emphasized good social relations – seeing the strong relations between relatives, neighbors and among the peasant community in general as the most important benefits of the foregone days. In remembering the *Village gatherings*, my interlocutors particularly emphasized that

people involved in the organization were enthusiasts who worked without being paid. Someone offered a room for practicing, others assisted in setting the stage or cleaning up the village. That was a significant feature in creating the image of the sociable past, where everyone tried to help and contribute to the development of the community. In their stories, the past was portrayed as a period marked by joint singing and dancing, which involved all community members in common social activities. To quote people I conversed with, the main life qualities of those times were socializing (*druženje*), helpfulness (*pomaganje*) and togetherness (*zajedništvo*). Even though in many villages of Niško Polje the cultural centers' halls had been demolished, sometimes not even having windows and heating, they were always crammed with audience during the program performing. All members of the village community were delighted by the opportunity to welcome people from other villages, and promote their village in the best possible way.

In the opinion of the villagers, with the beginning of the 1990s and the Slobodan Milošević's regime, the weakening of the administrative support, state funding and closing of the state institutions that made up the institutional framework caused the loss of interest for the *Village gatherings*. As the main obstacle in organizing the manifestation, the interlocutors emphasized the multiparty system, which brought about strong polarization of political orientations. Organizers emphasized that the frequent alternation of the local authorities rendered the cooperation between the republic and local organizers all the more complex, making the joint work in organizing the *Village gatherings* very difficult. For my interlocutors, the new democratic changes after the 5th of October 2000 Revolution and the new local government in the city of Niš (the parties of the so-called "Democratic forces" – *Demokratski blok* who won elections in 1996) gave preference to the urban culture, neglecting cultural activities in the rural areas. Some of them even told me that their policy was directed at building up a civil society (*građansko društvo*, which in the very etymology of the phrase excludes peasants), trying to distance themselves from their rural origins. Many of the people who actively participated in organizing the *Village gatherings* told me that party clashes became even more numerous after 1996, because of the dissensions between the republic and local

authorities. This is the principal reason that it is very difficult today to find people of different political inclinations willing to cooperate on the same project. All of my interlocutors felt abandoned by both the local administrators in Niš as well as the republic authorities who let the culture life in their villages die out. They explained to me that individual ideas and energy exist, but without the municipality or state support, it is not possible to realize these projects.

Obtained stories disaffirm the attitude that all socialist state-sponsored manifestations represented artificial and imposed forms of communities' activities. On the contrary, they illuminate a significant role of these events in the everyday life of the villagers, as a specific revitalizing of the former communal ritual activities. While working on the organization of the *Village gatherings* community members shared common duties, interests and goals, which provide cohesion of the rural community. At this point, I found very useful Gerald W. Creed's study on the erosion of ritual practice in post-socialist Bulgaria, who claims that public activities which bring people together through cooperative activities represent important forum for sociability of socialist times. He points out that the village social networks in socialism were not 'family-atomized' as it was usually interpreted (Creed 2002:64). The case of Serbia showed the similar practice where the social relations during socialism were strengthened by the informal family festivals and gatherings, but also by the local state-supervised manifestations as well. Ruination of the regional cultural institutions and vanishing of state-sponsored cultural activities in the post-socialist period are both a cause and a result of an ongoing process of village declining in Southeastern Serbia.