

SOCIALISM

SINGING ACTIVISM AFTER YUGOSLAVIA

ANA HOFMAN

Socialism Now

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Abbreviations

AVNOJ	Antifašističko vijeće narodnog oslobođenja Jugoslavije (Anti-Fascist Council for the National Liberation of Yugoslavia)
CPY	Communist Party of Yugoslavia (Komunistička partija Jugoslavije; Komunistična partija Jugoslavije)
FPRY	Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia (Federativna ljudska republika Jugoslavija; Federativna narodna republika Jugoslavija)
JNA	Jugoslovenska narodna armija (Yugoslav People's Army)
LCY	League of Communists of Yugoslavia (Savez komunista Jugoslavije; Zveza komunistov Jugoslavije)
NOV	Narodnooslobodilačka vojska Jugoslavije (People's Liberation Army of Yugoslavia)
PLS	People's Liberation Struggle (Narodnooslobodilačka borba; Narodnoosvobodilni boj)
SDS	Slovenska demokratska stranka (Slovenian Democratic Party)
SFRY	Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (Socijalistička federativna republika Jugoslavija; Socialistična federativna republika Jugoslavija)
SUBNOR	Savez udruženja boraca Narodnooslobodilačkog rata (Federal Associations of Fighters of the People's Liberation War)

Guide to Companion Website

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Some material that cannot be made available in a book, namely, color versions of the book's figures and additional images and videos of the post-Yugoslav activist choirs, are available on the Companion Website. Readers are encouraged to consult this resource in conjunction with each book chapter. The selected audiovisual examples illustrate the events and activities described in the chapter, along with the supplemental content about the choirs. All pictures and videos are by the author of the book, sourced from the choirs' archives, or contributed by choir members. If different, it is indicated in the description of the image or video.

Singing Socialism Now

Smrt kapitalizmu i fašizmu, socijalizam i sloboda narodu!

(“Death to capitalism and fascism; socialism and
freedom for the people!”)

This slogan, modified from the slogan of the Yugoslav World War II anti-fascist resistance movement,¹ appears on banners during the first wave of the massive protests in the region of former Yugoslavia that started in 2011.² Attending the protests in Slovenia in 2012, I hear slogans, songs, and chants from my childhood as they resound in the streets of Ljubljana. I join the crowd in singing the once-popular melodies of “Bella Ciao,” “The Internationale,” and Yugoslav partisan songs that trigger memories of the multiethnic country and its violent dissolution and clearly express an anti-capitalist sentiment.³ As we march, I witness some people reacting to these sounds with tears in their eyes. Others, including myself, raise their fists high. The melodies merge with a cacophony of voices shouting: *Lopovi!* (Thieves!), *Dosta je!* (Enough!), *Gotof je!* (He’s done!). The buzzing of whistles and rattles, music from loudspeakers, car sirens, and bicycle bells accompany their shouts. Singing helps us channel accumulated frustration and anger, expresses our collective vulnerability and despair, and offers hope.

These songs, chants, and banners articulated an ethos of trans-Yugoslav solidarity, testifying to the emergence of new cross-border alliances for the first time since the country’s breakup in 1991. What connected people across

¹ The original slogan is *Smrt fašizmu, sloboda narodu!* (“Death to fascism, freedom for the people!”), abbreviated as *SFSN*.

² The protests started in Croatia in 2011 and continued in Slovenia in 2012–2013 and Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2013, which is why some define it as the “Balkan Spring” (see Horvat and Štiks 2015). About the “Colorful Revolution” in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia in 2016, see Atanasoski and McElroy 2018.

³ As an illustration, see the singing at the protests in Slovenia: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t8CEwdcKw1k> (Jure Grgurevič Gmail, dir., 2013).

ethnic lines was the need to fight for workers' and social rights, free public education, and health care—all legacies of the Yugoslav socialist revolution. When writing about the protests in Bosnia and Herzegovina, anthropologists Larisa Kurtović and Azra Hromadžić describe how protesters employed the discourse of the class struggle and “socialist-era understandings of social justice and civic political participation” (2017, 3), which channeled the specific socialist sensibilities.⁴

Not surprisingly, those sensibilities triggered strong and polarized public responses. The conservative, right-wing media accused the protests of recalling “bygone communist times” and promoting the totalitarian regime and its failed ideology.⁵ Protestors singing “The Internationale” and Yugoslav partisan songs prompted the Slovenian Democratic Party (Slovenska demokratska stranka, SDS) to sarcastically describe the protests on its Twitter account as an “uprising of communist zombies.”⁶ Other commentators expressed discomfort with evoking the Yugoslav partisan resistance and revolutionary class struggle, asserting that the revival of socialist ideas and values was divorced from the contemporary political reality. For them, the ghost of socialism was coming back to haunt us just two decades after we had defeated it.

In protests taking place in the following years, I observe how the chanting and songs persist, regardless of the causes: whether standing against anti-refugee policies, systemic fascism and racism, environmental crises, gentrification and urban restructuring, or gender-based violence. The discontent with all kinds of ongoing economic, social, and ecological decline in the post-Yugoslav region reveals that the belief in a bright capitalist future, which has supposedly been unfolding since the dissolution of Yugoslavia, is deeply shaken. Many protests amplify the global unrest and new social movements founded in the aftermath of the 2008 economic crisis, calling for a radically new vision of the future, diverging from the capitalist one. These include Occupy Wall Street and the anti-austerity movements in the European

⁴ The protests also fostered experimenting with horizontal organization and direct democracy. In Bosnia and Herzegovina and in Slovenia, as well as in the latest students' protests in Serbia (2024–2025), this experimentation included the organization of people's assemblies (*plenumi*) that, in many ways, recalled the legacy of Yugoslav workers' self-management, which I discuss later in the chapter. For a comparative perspective on the protests, see Bieber and Brentin 2018.

⁵ “Pri SDS obsojajo sovražno govorico ‘vstajnikov’” (n.d.).

⁶ Twitter @stranka SDS, 21. 12. 2012. For the analysis of this tweet, see Lekić-Subašić 2018, 106. The “zombie metaphor” is often used in other parts of formerly socialist Eastern Europe to characterize a seemingly continuous return of communism in a zombie-like manner (Atanasoski and McElroy 2018, 279) or to equate state socialism with a dinosaur that “somehow did not die in due time” (Tlostanova 2018, 9).

context,⁷ the Refugees Welcome movement, and various global feminist and ecological movements.

These melodies, chants, and sounds blast through the streets, as a scream of dissatisfied crowds, echoing the socialist past and imbuing our present with an urgent, piercing resonance. This sonic urgency transcends the post-Yugoslav context, serving as a relentless soundtrack to the pervasive effects of neoliberal capitalism and its crises.

* * *

This book is about singing socialism as both a historical project and an imagined future, as well as the complicated coexistence of the two in the present. It explores the sonic recuperation of socialist ideas and experiences to rethink how political capacity is understood, practiced, and imagined under the social and political anxiety, apathy, and exhaustion caused by neoliberalism. As much as it brought some new aspects in terms of structure and governing, neoliberalism did not dismiss the earlier forms of Western capitalism but adapted and expanded it (Lee and LiPuma 2002, 210; Taylor 2016, 4). As a system of governance, neoliberal capitalism advocates for free market, privatization, and deregulation through the increased role of the financial sector and corporate capital, while paradoxically seeking state intervention to enhance the circulation of capital. Such a vision of politics, economy, and society is fully subsumed to the logic of the free market, which takes on different forms in different social, political, and cultural environments. Thus, this book views neoliberal policies as multifaceted and continually changing—ideological and structural—processes of “neoliberalization” (Peck and Tickell 2002). It looks at how music and sound are the fields where those multiple and contradictory processes are unfolding.⁸

I argue that a focus on singing reveals contemporary political struggles in all their ambiguities, granting access to what often remains hidden in the fractures of social movements, at the margins of civil society, and in conventional activism. What I call *strategic amateurism* helps shed new light on the revalorization of the symbolic and historical project of socialism, which

⁷ Fostered by the so-called Greek or austerity crisis of 2011, such as Spain’s 15M or the Indignados movement in 2011–2012. Some also evolved into political platforms that cultivated socialist ideas, like Syriza in Greece and Podemos in Spain.

⁸ For the examination of the relationship between music and neoliberal capitalism, among others, see the works of Guilbault 2010; Stokes 2010; Tausig 2014; León 2014; James 2014; Sykes 2015; Taylor 2016; Hofman 2016; Moore 2016; Ritchey 2017.

mobilized and continues to mobilize people to struggle for social equality and challenge the capitalist market logic in structuring our sociopolitical lives. The post-Yugoslav context, with its specific type of socialism and violent dissolution followed by the aggressive incorporation of neoliberal policies in the last thirty years, offers a perfect ground for this task. As I will show throughout this book, singing (about) socialism exposes the neglected historical legacies of nonprofessional expressive practices and the crucial importance of communal leisure activities in contesting today's global patterns of capitalist exploitation, social fragmentation, and the commodification of all spheres of life. These pages attempt to capture the lived moments and stories and invite us to change the optics of how and where we search for the political potential from the lens of the former Second World⁹ to sharpen the edges of the wider debate about the power of expressive practices in envisioning new ways of anti-capitalist organizing.

Socialism Now follows the activities of singing collectives that call themselves activist or *samoorganizovani* (“self-organized”) choirs,¹⁰ which have emerged in the post-Yugoslav cities of Belgrade, Ljubljana, Pula, Skopje, and Zagreb and among post-Yugoslavs in Vienna. These collectives’ revitalization of the repertoire of Yugoslav and international partisan, worker, and revolutionary songs gained public attention during and after the 2011–2012 protests that were happening when I formally began my field research. At the same time, my engagement with the choirs goes beyond simple fieldwork because I have been closely involved with choir members for over two decades.

My first encounter with activist choirs was during my student days in Belgrade in 2000. I went to an “open audition” for the Horkeškart choir (the very name allegorically refers to “a choir made up of rejects”) at a key venue for alternative culture, the Centar za kulturnu dekontaminaciju (Center for Cultural Decontamination). As I was later informed, the choir was part of the artistic project *Your Shit—Your Responsibility* by Dragan Protić Prota and Đorđe Balmazović, both members of the artistic collective Škart (literally: “a

⁹ Lately, several studies engage with post-socialist societies through the lenses of global histories and postcolonial critique (see Tlostanova 2012; Koobak, Tlostanova, and Thapar-Björkert 2021) and argue for the need to reclaim the Global East as a liminal space that complicates the notions of North and South (see Müller 2020). For more about the potentials and limits of this approach, see Hofman and Petrović 2023.

¹⁰ The term *samoorganizacija* can be translated as self-organization or self-management. It is widely used for the political and activist forms of organization beyond established institutional systems, usually based on collaborative, participatory principles. For the post-Yugoslav choirs, self-organization contains a contemporary notion, while self-management has a strong historical notion attached to workers’ self-management, which I further explain in Chapter 2.

reject”).¹¹ After the audition—which was actually a first rehearsal since the organizers accepted everyone who had shown up—I decided not to join. However, my roommate Vesna became a passionate and active Horkeškart member over the next few years, which enabled me to closely follow their activities. Eventually, in 2007, the choir transformed into Horkestar (Alternative Choir and Orchestra),¹² while Škart founded the new choir Proba (Rehearsal).

In 2005, a new activist choir was founded in Zagreb: the mixed feminist-lesbian choir Le Zbor (whose title combines the word *zbor* [“choir”] and the prefix *le*, to denote lesbian), the first choir of its kind in Southeastern Europe. Coincidentally, at the beginning of the 2000s, I was involved in a cross-border Serbian-Croatian student research project with Lidija, who later became Le Zbor’s conductor. She and I had kept in touch, and thus, I had attended several of Le Zbor’s performances long before I formally started my research.

The rising interest in singing activism in the region sparked the founding of the female choir Kombinat¹³ in Ljubljana in 2008 and, a year later, Hor 29. Novembar, which initially brought together people from former Yugoslavia living in Vienna and gradually evolved into a singing collective with an international membership.¹⁴ I have observed how choral activities have intensified and transformed since 2011. New choirs have emerged, inspired by their predecessors, such as two women’s choirs founded in 2014, the choir of the cooperative Praksa (Praxis) from Pula, Croatia, and the feminist choir Z’borke (a wordplay that combines *zbor* [“choir”] and *borke* [“female fighters”])¹⁵ from Ljubljana. Later, in 2016, came the Belgrade-based Naša pjesma (Our Song) and Domaćigosti (Domestic Guests), a choir that brings refugees from the Middle East together with residents of Zagreb.¹⁶

¹¹ The names of the projects and the venue have a note of self-irony, the former referring to the “contamination” of culture by nationalistic and commercial content. On the Škart collective and this particular project, see the website “Škart” (n.d.).

¹² The choir’s name combines the words *hor* (“choir”) and *orkestar* (“orchestra”).

¹³ The choir got its name after the Rog Combine (Kombinat Rog) in Ljubljana. The Rog Factory was founded in 1871 and, after World War II, was nationalized and turned into the Rog Bicycle Factory—Kombinat Rog—which operated until 1991. In 2006, the factory complex and surrounding buildings were occupied by various associations and groups, civil society organizations, artists, and individuals, transforming this space into the first and only political squat in Slovenia. In 2008, the founding members of Kombinat came up with the idea for the choir at this space. The squat was forcefully removed in 2021 by the city government. The broader meaning of the term *kombinat* refers to the large industrial enterprise, particularly in the Soviet Union.

¹⁴ The choir’s name translates to the November 29th Choir, the date of the founding of the Federal People’s Republic of Yugoslavia in 1945.

¹⁵ This choir’s full name is Feminist choir Z’borke—Feministički pevski zbor (FPZ) Z’borke.

¹⁶ Although I focus on the choirs that are still active, I also mention the activities of those no longer active.

At the same time, some of the established choirs ceased activity (e.g., Raspeani Skopjani¹⁷ in Skopje, Macedonia, and Le wHORE, Belgrade's equivalent to Le Zbor in Zagreb).

Like living organisms, choirs constantly transform. They gather people from different generational, gender, social, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds and geographical areas. Despite a high turnover among their members, most are people from twenty-five to fifty years old (though some particular choirs, like Praksa and Kombinat, also have older-generation members). While meeting and talking to them, I realize that although we do not all belong to the same generation, we share a belief in the contemporary relevance of socialist ideas and values. The ones who, like me, have a partial experience of living in socialist Yugoslavia belong to the generation of “the last pioneers.”¹⁸ We spent our childhood in the last years of Yugoslavia and adulthood in the period immediately following the state's disintegration. We share a view on socialism through the lens of childhood, which allows us a certain “distanced proximity”—a less-burdened look at this past, which does not easily collide with the dominant narratives of the system's success or failures. In our conversation, Živa, one of the members of Kombinat, acknowledges this stance: “This choir is made up mostly of girls who were the happiest members of socialist society since we did not feel its negative aspects. I think this is why Kombinat is able to exist in such a form.”¹⁹ We were also exposed to the music, sounds, and songs that were dismissed or abandoned after the breakup of the country and have witnessed the rise of the new aural practices of post-Yugoslav nation-states.

In the chapters that follow, I present how the choir members' engagement with the forms of organization and the song repertoire recuperates a socialist, anti-fascist, and leftist ethos to advocate for workers' and social rights; stand against class stratification, gentrification, privatization, and forced migrations; and engage in LGBTQIA+, feminist, and ecological activism. I attend performances that the Western professional canon typically considers unusual for choral performances. Apart from protests and rallies, singing takes place in front of factories, the apartments of evicted families, monuments, cultural institutions, hospitals, and open-air markets, and within elderly care institutions, refugee centers, shopping malls, public transportation facilities, parks, cafés, and other public spaces. These

¹⁷ In English translation: Singing Skopjans.

¹⁸ For more about this generational identification, see Popović 2021.

¹⁹ Živa, interview by the author, December 27, 2013, online.

performances, which some of the choir members call “guerrilla” singing, are usually structured as site-specific interventions in urban spaces, which I examine closely in Chapter 2.

I share my account of practicing collective singing that revitalizes the lost or neglected socialist experience, knowledge, infrastructure, and resources. To tell that story, I juxtapose ethnographic data with archival sources. Online questionnaires, social media ethnography, and group discussions supplement my long-term, multifaceted research as a choir member and participant observer at rehearsals, concerts, protests, flash mobs, festivals, workshops, and public debates. I promulgate a historicized and contextualized approach that also demands insight into historical sources, particularly concerning the data about musical activities within the Yugoslav anti-fascist movement in World War II and later Yugoslav cultural politics. Taking all of this into account allows me to discuss how singing activism resides in the distinct legacies and histories of the post-Yugoslav region, not as a simple translation of historical moments into contemporaneity but as a practice that profoundly reshapes both the past and the present.

Socialism: Past, Future, and Now

About which socialism do activist choirs sing? “Socialism” is a term that has continuously gained attention in everyday political discourses, triggering polarizing stances and heated debates. We can follow its increasing public presence worldwide, especially since the 2008 global financial crisis. Nevertheless, socialism often remains a “forbidden” or “dirty” word. This positioning prevents a more profound engagement with the ideological mechanisms and political promises attached to the multiple meanings, historical notions, and experiences of socialism. In the wider understanding, many use socialism to define the political project of a state-controlled economy and public ownership of the means of production or a welfare state model characterized by public health care and school systems (usually taking the Scandinavian model as an example). The political imaginaries of socialism and its practical implementation, however, differ across different geographical locations and historical times. This difference is essential for understanding the contemporary uses of “socialism,” which appear when articulating sensibilities and solidarities against capitalist exploitation, nationalism, xenophobia, and fascism.

As in my previous work (Hofman 2010; 2011a; 2011b), in this book, I strive to contest views based on the so-called totalitarian paradigm, the interpretative framework that sees state socialism as an oppressive, criminal regime and perpetuates the conviction that capitalism and democracy are an inseparable dyad.²⁰ According to Kristen Ghodsee (2015), such a framework nurtures the global discourse on totalitarian communist regimes that dismisses anyone critical of liberal capitalism as the only legitimate democratic political idea.²¹ Such discourses have strengthened the claims that preserving the memory of the socialist project is an “undemocratic” act. This reveals the anti-communism hidden under the slogan of democratization, which has been deeply incorporated into the foundations of the public cultures of memory since 1989.²² As a first step in spreading “freedom and democracy” worldwide, the narrative and policy concentrated on the final defeat of the totalitarianisms that European nations shared in the twentieth century. Nationalist political elites in the post-socialist societies, including post-Yugoslav countries, Ghodsee points out, enthusiastically adopted the discourse of “two totalitarianisms” (fascism and communism) as proof of the countries’ democratization.

I join the scholars who offer a critical reflection of those discourses, pointing to an enduring difficulty in grasping the state-socialist project beyond the Cold War discourse and its liberal premises.²³ Therefore, this book can also be read as an intervention into theory production about the political and economic system that is usually called historical or actual existing socialism. It stands against conflating socialism solely with the work of the regime or party while it is still tentative to its systemic, structural, and organizational aspects.

²⁰ For a recent discussion of the totalitarian paradigm and its application in the post-Yugoslav context, see Kirn 2019, 4–5.

²¹ On liberal democracy as a universal democratic political system, see Scott 2014, 129.

²² This discourse was institutionalized in the 2009 resolution of the European Parliament on European Conscience and Totalitarianism against all totalitarian crimes and resulted in the “European Day of Remembrance for Victims of Stalinism and Nazism.” As a first step in spreading “freedom and democracy” worldwide, the narrative and policy concentrated on the final defeat of the totalitarianisms that European nations shared in the twentieth century.

²³ My approach is deeply influenced by the tradition of scholarship on Yugoslavia and the post-Yugoslav countries that strives to familiarize readers with approaches that are rejected by dominant epistemological mapping. See, e.g., Erdei 2004; Hofman 2011c; Petrović 2012; Duraković and Matošević 2013; Jelača, Kolanović, and Lugarić 2017; Bonfiglioli 2019; Kirn 2019; Videkanić 2019; Praznik 2021; Project “Yugosplaining the World. The Disorder of Things.” See the website “Yugosplaining the World” (n.d.).

Before I continue with the short historical overview of the Yugoslav socialist project, I have to underline that singing socialism and singing socialist songs do not necessarily mean the same thing. As Eric Drott argues, it would be nearly impossible to claim the existence of something as “socialist music” or “socialist song.”²⁴ However, as much as the relationship between music and socialism is “at once contingent and constitutive” (2019, 9), there are still certain songs that listeners would unquestionably perceive as socialist. “Bella Ciao” and “The Internationale,” mentioned in the opening vignette, are a couple of the globally recognized pieces that carry the leftist, socialist ethos. Apart from this international repertoire, the songs that people across the former Yugoslavia consider socialist stem from the historical period of the People’s Liberation Struggle (PLS),²⁵ also known as the Yugoslav Partisan Movement, the anti-fascist armed resistance in World War II.

After the Axis forces attacked Yugoslavia on April 6, 1941, and the Yugoslav Royal Army signed the capitulation on April 17, individual uprisings against Nazi occupation became a more thoroughly organized resistance. Members of the partisan resistance became known for guerrilla fighting under difficult circumstances. Between 1941 and 1945, the PLS mobilized a wide range of people from different ethnic, social, gender, and generational backgrounds, including prewar communists, peasants, workers, and intellectuals from all areas of the former Yugoslavia, forming the largest World War II resistance movement and army in Europe, with more than 800,000 partisans in 1945.²⁶ Formally recognized as a part of the Allied Forces in 1943, what distinguished the PLS from other resistance movements was its revolutionary nature: along with fighting against Nazi forces and their local collaborators,²⁷ Yugoslav partisans strove for social, political, and economic transformations²⁸ under

²⁴ He underlines that both song and socialism are intrinsically multiple and resist being subsumed under a single, synthetic concept (Drott 2019, 7).

²⁵ *Narodno-oslobodilačka borba* in Serbo-Croatian, *Narodno-osvobodilni boj* in Slovenian.

²⁶ Despite the lack of resources and the limitations of guerrilla warfare, Yugoslav partisans managed to establish the first liberated territory in Europe in southwestern Serbia on September 24, 1941, known as *Užička republika* (Užice Republic). The significance of the PLS in World War II is also visible in the fact that, in contrast to other Eastern European countries, which were liberated by the Red Army, the vast majority of Yugoslav territories were liberated by Yugoslav partisans themselves.

²⁷ Local fascist collaborators and nationalistic forces included *Četnici* (Chetniks) and *Ustaše* (Ustasha), and *Domobranici* (Home Guards) in Slovenia, who made World War II in Yugoslavia a civil war.

²⁸ The role of the CPY in the formation of the PLS is highly contested in contemporary historiography. The general tendency in the last three decades is to accuse CPY members of imposing revolutionary and socialist ideas and appropriating an initially “neutral” political orientation of partisan resistance. In Chapter 4, I will delve into these discourses as part of a more general “ethnicization” of the legacy of the World War II anti-fascist resistance, visible in dismissing its revolutionary notions and emphasizing the ethnic ones.

the leadership of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia (CPY) and its leader, Josip Broz “Tito.”²⁹ Toward the end of World War II, the PLS leaders openly aimed at taking state power and overthrowing the monarchist system of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia (previously the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes) ruled by the Karađorđević Dynasty. The class struggle and the ideals of “brotherhood and unity” (*bratstvo i jedinstvo*) that the PLS promulgated were the foundation of a new socialist society in place of the old monarchy that executed repressive politics against progressive ideas and prosecuted workers and communists for political organizing.³⁰ The new system would provide better working and living conditions for all people, neutralize economic inequalities, and reduce interethnic tensions.

As I will show in Chapter 3, collective singing during the PLS built up the fighting spirit and exposed fighters to revolutionary ideas. The song repertoire was an assemblage of different genres, ranging from folk songs from various parts of Yugoslavia that fighters had brought from home to the international workers’ and revolutionary songs, many of them from the October Revolution or the Spanish Civil War, and leftist songs from the 1920s and 1930s. This repertoire was subsumed under the category of partisan songs (*partizanske pesme* in Serbo-Croatian and *partizanske pesmi* in Slovenian). More than particular music features or stylistic criteria, the elements defining partisan songs are the contexts of their performance and themes, which are broadly associated with the left-oriented, pan-socialist ethos and the struggle against fascism.

In the aftermath of World War II, partisan songs played an essential role in sustaining revolutionary enthusiasm and establishing the PLS as one of the most fundamental pillars of socialist Yugoslavia and its “third path to socialism.” Officially founded in 1945, the Federal People’s Republic of Yugoslavia (FPRY), later renamed the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY),³¹ shared similarities with other Eastern European state-socialist countries but also differed from them after abandoning the Soviet model in 1948.³² Yugoslavia was not part of the “Eastern bloc”; instead, it

²⁹ Josip Broz “Tito” was the leader of the partisan resistance, the founder of the Anti-Fascist Council for the National Liberation of Yugoslavia (AVNOJ), and the president of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) from its foundation in 1945 until his death in 1980.

³⁰ Communist Party members and sympathizers were imprisoned or executed, which culminated in the so-called Obznana (Ban) in 1929 and forced them to act illegally. For the history of the First and Second Yugoslavia, see Calic 2019.

³¹ Referred to in the book as socialist Yugoslavia.

³² On the “Tito–Stalin split” in the English language, see Vucinich 1982; Lampe 2000, 245–254.

helped to found the Non-Aligned Movement.³³ It epitomized “socialism with a human face,” based on the participatory and decentralized organizational principles of workers’ self-management and a social ownership. Thus, from the early 1950s on, among the main goals of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia (LCY)³⁴ were not only the abolition of private property but also the abolition of state ownership to be replaced by social ownership. Self-management was formally introduced in 1953 as a participatory and cooperative model of political and economic power distribution that would diminish political monopolization and the power of the state bureaucracy. The economic measures introduced by a constitutional act in 1953 approved Yugoslavia’s accession to international economic markets, leading to remarkable industrial growth, while in 1958, the LCY further confirmed an “anti-dogmatic” approach to socialism through a further “de-etatization”—the gradual reduction of state power in decision-making processes on all levels of governance, a move designed to foster a transition from socialism to communism.³⁵

In practice, this transition was a dynamic sociopolitical process pervaded by an array of contradictions. The constitution of 1963 introduced so-called market reforms, formalizing the striving toward economic liberalization (see Kardelj 1977; Šuvar 1980; Horvat 1983). In doing so, the Yugoslav state significantly increased financial support to private owners (mostly in agriculture) and abandoned the remnants of a centralized economy (see Hanson in Dimitrijević 2016, 32). In short, in the 1960s, the officials accepted the market in the process of economic liberalization, which brought a profound transformation in all spheres of economic and social life in Yugoslavia (Jakovljević 2016, 12), including sociocultural life (Kolarić and Vukićević 2018, 1244).³⁶ The Yugoslav road to socialism was thus a particularly complex one that attempted to merge socialist production and the market economy to create a peculiar version of “consumer socialism” (Doder 1978, 131) or “Yugoslav market socialism” (Unkovski-Korica 2015; Dimitrijević 2016, 31).

³³ For recent studies of the Non-Aligned Movement, see Jakovina 2011; Videkanić 2019; Stubbs 2023.

³⁴ It was renamed in 1952 from the previous CPY to emphasize a decentralized and participatory structure instead of a centralized party structure.

³⁵ Here, I would like to remind readers that socialism itself is a transition—a transitional phase toward communism. While this emphasis is occasionally present in the accounts of post-Yugoslav scholars, the concept of transition is more often understood primarily in the light of the post-socialist period.

³⁶ More about the phases in the Yugoslav workers’ self-management development, see Jakovljević 2016, 11–12 and Archer, Duda, and Stubbs 2016, 34.

In pursuing the idea of a state system based on the emancipation of working people,³⁷ the self-management model was not immune to social stratification between the newly established technocratic political elite and workers. As several scholars argue,³⁸ underscoring the contradictory mechanisms of private ownership and capital flows, these processes testify to the proto-capitalist tendency of Yugoslav socialism or even regard Yugoslavia as a post-socialist society beginning in the mid-1950s (Jović 2003; Suvin 2014; Dimitrijević 2016; Kirn 2019). In their opinion, market-oriented policies were a sign of a “lack of socialism” that resulted in the practical employment of self-management being an incomplete and ambiguous process that failed to fulfill its promises.

Examining the cultural production in socialist Yugoslavia in relation to the dominant modes of production, Rade Pantić elaborates on the false dichotomy of central planning vs. market. He claims that the existence of market does not automatically indicate the capitalist mode of production, of which socialist Yugoslavia was an example. The combination of the market economy and central planning meant that market relations were encouraged in the sphere of production of goods, but the organization of production was controlled by the central planning. This combined model, which was evolving in the direction of the predominance of market economy, made Yugoslavia rather than a socialist society, a “post-capitalist” one (2018, 203).

In her analysis of Yugoslav socialism, Johanna Bockman, however, shows that the foundation of both socialist and capitalist systems lies in the neoclassical economic model. Drawing on Polanyi, she stands against the reduction of socialism to a market-less economy and shows that the (socialist) state vs. the market is a false dichotomy, as socialism and capitalism share the same conceptual origins (2011).

While I see the crucial need to focus on the modes of production in analyzing cultural practices, I do not follow the contemporary redefinitions of Yugoslav socialism that rest on the “success or failure” narrative. Avoiding

³⁷ The category of working people (*radni ljudi, delavsko ljudstvo*)—literally, anyone who works, despite any traditional hierarchies of value associated with different types of labor—is an inclusive concept that must not be confused with the working class. While the working classes were given a leading role in ruling the state, their task could be executed only in alliance with the peasantry and the intelligentsia, as they all formed the larger body of working people. For the relationship between these two concepts, see Archer 2018. This understanding is key to my examination of activist choirs’ engagement with mass songs (*masovne pesmi, masovne pjesme, masovne pesme*) and new forms of class solidarities after Yugoslavia in Chapter 3.

³⁸ See Unkovski-Korica 2014; 2015; 2016; Kirn 2014; Stanić 2014; Suvin 2014; Dimitrijević 2016; Musić 2011; 2021.

assessing to what extent this system was “socialist” or “capitalist,”³⁹ I stand for an historicized approach to offer readers an opportunity to embrace the Yugoslav project as it was envisioned by its creators: as an alternative to capitalism by establishing socialist productive and social relations.

The Exhaustion of a Deferred Present

Why have partisan, revolutionary, and workers’ songs been sung again with enthusiasm and hope in the last few decades? Answering this question demands a careful tracing of the profound economic, social, and political transformations in the region after the breakup of Yugoslavia. Socialist Yugoslavia was conceived as a federation of equal constitutive nations and nationalities. The country’s leadership directed the political agenda at building a shared Yugoslav identity based on socioeconomic equality, social and cultural modernization, tolerance, gender balance, and equal legal rights for all citizens.⁴⁰ Consequently, nationalism, chauvinism, and separatism were considered a threat to these strivings and remained the most sensitive internal political issues. Despite the official policies aimed to suppress any form of nationalism, the ethnic tensions, growing from the beginning of the 1970s, escalated in the mid-1980s and lent momentum to separatist tendencies. Like many post-Yugoslavs of my generation, I vividly remember the country’s dissolution in 1991.⁴¹ As a teenager, I could not imagine that these tensions would soon result in ethnic conflict and massive killings, leading to deaths in the thousands. The wars that broke out after Slovenia and Croatia proclaimed their independence from Yugoslavia began in 1991 with the Ten-Day War, a fight between Slovenian territorial defense and the Yugoslav People’s Army (Jugoslovenska narodna armija, JNA),⁴² which aligned with the Serbian side of the conflict under the leadership of Slobodan Milošević. What followed were devastating ethnic wars in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina from 1991 to 1995.⁴³ The final conflict in Kosovo and NATO’s bombing of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (consisting of

³⁹ See Archer, Duda, and Stubbs 2016; Jelača, Kolanović, and Lugarić 2017.

⁴⁰ Sekulic, Massey, and Hodson 1994, 95.

⁴¹ Note that this was two years after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989.

⁴² JNA in Serbo-Croatian, Jugoslovenska ljudska armada (JLA) in Slovenian.

⁴³ Since the book does not focus on these historical events, I do not engage with the complexities of the Yugoslav ethnic wars, in particular the role of the JNA, the violence of Serb paramilitary forces, and the role of paramilitary forces of all sides in the conflict.

Serbia and Montenegro) in 1999 marked an end to the bloody dissolution of Yugoslavia.

The escalation of extreme nationalism and ethnic hatred during the wars persisted in the following decades as the dominant political discourse in the post-Yugoslav nation-states. Nationalist forces, striving to cement the political and cultural divisions along ethnic lines,⁴⁴ dismissed any shared legacies of Yugoslav socialist project. The radical reinterpretations of the historical notion of the PLS and revisionist discourses enabled this dismissal. Such reinterpretations accused Yugoslav partisans of committing postwar crimes against anti-communists while glorifying collaborationist forces for their nationalist-oriented profile. As I extensively analyze in Chapter 4, consequently, the music associated with the PLS and Yugoslav socialism was deemed inappropriate as a construct of the Communist regime. Performing and listening to partisan songs was pushed to the margin, if not forbidden, and associated with a past that some wanted forgotten and defeated. Ethnomusicologist Svanibor Pettan writes how this repertoire in Croatia completely disappeared from public and media soundscapes due to its connection with socialist Yugoslavia.⁴⁵ However, for many people who opposed the war and refused to take sides, these melodies evoked the violently disrupted shared experience of living in a multiethnic country.⁴⁶ Particularly for the ones forced to escape from their burning houses who decided to make a new home abroad, or who could not fit the new “ethnicized reality,” singing and listening to partisan songs was a way to cope with the exile and articulate an anti-nationalistic stance and sentiments.⁴⁷

In recent decades, the post-socialist “transition to capitalism and democracy” has renewed interest in this repertoire. The socialist past has reemerged as a critical response to supposed capitalist democratization, which, in practice, has proven to be an experience of economic dispossession

⁴⁴ For a more comprehensive historical account of socialist Yugoslavia and its dissolution, see Pirjevec 1995; Jović 2003; Pavlović and Živković 2013.

⁴⁵ In his work, written in the aftermath of the Yugoslav Wars, he states that since the JNA is the successor of the World War II People's Liberation Army of Yugoslavia (Narodno-oslobodilačka vojska Jugoslavije, NOVJ), partisan songs were immediately associated with Serbian “aggressors” (Pettan 1998, 20). For a sharper interpretation, it is important to add that the official politics of that time—that insisted on the equation between JNA and Serbian forces—used the discourses of Serbian aggressors to discredit anything related to the Yugoslav partisan movement. For more about the perception of JNA, see Petrović 2024.

⁴⁶ On the peace movement of the 1990s in Serbia and Croatia, see Jansen 2005; Bilić 2012; Athanasiou 2017.

⁴⁷ On cherishing the memory of Yugoslavia in diaspora communities, see Velikonja 2010; on music, in this context, see Hofman 2009.

and privatization—"the sell-out of the accumulated and socialized means of reproduction and infrastructure" (Kirn 2019, 8). In the "desert of post-socialism" (Horvat and Štiks 2015) or post-socialist disaster capitalism (Atanasoski and McElroy 2018, 273), the ruling classes used the discourse of anti-communism to privatize the previously socially owned means of production. In the post-Yugoslav sociopolitical life, the mantra of foreign investment as the primary source for the countries' economic survival prevailed, hiding behind the lack of politics in the public interest, corruption, and clientelism.⁴⁸

Neoliberal capitalism has revealed its cruel nature for those of us in the region whose lives have been deeply devastated by the post-socialist "reforms" and the material and economic losses it brought. Instead of prosperity and stability, it has resulted in exploitative, uncertain, and exhausting realities. The consequences of privatization, such as the diminishing of public infrastructure, the rise of social inequalities, and the loss of workers' and social rights, have limited life to bare survival, resulting in a "skepticism of temporal certainty" (Greenberg 2019, 2). For this reason, scholars of post-socialism⁴⁹ refuse the teleological narrative of "transition" from a "socialist totalitarian past" to a "European democratic future," as it reduces an intricate sociopolitical process that in many ways is still taking place to "an abrupt temporal switch" (Bailyn, Jelača, and Lugarić 2018, 8). Some of them argue, more radically, that the discourse of never-ending transition is an excuse for exercising Western-liberal dominance and patronage (Horvat and Štiks 2015, 22). Recalling the legacies of Yugoslav socialism at protests or through activist and artistic engagement, as some recent studies present, is how people search for new temporal alternatives to regain a sense of political agency and alternative modes of being.⁵⁰ As a utopian project (Buden 2014; Petrović 2016) and the past-future temporal formation itself (Velikonja 2009b) or a future(s) past (Kurtović and Hromadžić 2017), socialist Yugoslavia reemerges as a means of dealing with the condition of a lost future or utopia.

⁴⁸ For a study of clientelism in Bosnia and Herzegovina, see Brković 2017.

⁴⁹ On the genealogy and the politically potent notion of this term beyond the area, which calls for embracing socialist legacies on various scales, see Atanasoski and McElroy 2018, 276. The most vocal in such critiques is Boris Buden, whose work demasks the European Union integration as a process of promoting the liberal ideas of progress to which political elites in the post-Yugoslav countries aspire, leaving no space for any other alternative "modernizations" (Buden 2010; 2020). See also Petrović 2012; Bailyn, Jelača, and Lugarić 2018.

⁵⁰ Such as Razsa 2015; Hofman 2015a; 2016; Horvat and Štiks 2015; Kurtović and Hromadžić 2017; Kurtović 2019. For more studies of post-socialist temporality, see also Jansen 2015; Bailyn, Jelača, and Lugarić 2018; Dzenovska and Kurtović 2018.

In dialogue with the existing approaches, this book concentrates on the “now”—a constantly deferred present tense. I address singing (about) socialism in a time of profound apathy, exhaustion, and scarcity of political action in its everyday, mundane existences in the here and now. Not neglecting that a future-oriented, utopian view is an important reference for the people who appear in this book, I aim to intervene in the lack of present tense in the interpretive frameworks that result from post-socialism being itself a temporal caricature, “a floating historical state stranded between negation and anticipation, between the past and future,” as Ozren Pupovac eloquently argues (2010). His observation that post-socialism is defined by ignorance of its own present—standing between the projected “horrors” of the socialist past and the broken promises of the capitalist future—invites us to think seriously about how the “now” structures life in the post-Yugoslav context.

Being and doing limited to the “now” is a result of exhaustion that derives from the long-term sense of sociopolitical volatility in the region, resulting in the loss of hope (Jansen 2015), the collective feeling of apathy (Greenberg 2010; 2014), or an atmosphere of collective “paralysis” (Arsenijević 2016). Those affects, while having specific modalities in the post-Yugoslav context, structure the contemporary political realm in which citizens around the globe cannot engage in longer-term collective organizing or structural intervention. As Srnicek and Williams write, people feel largely excluded from decision-making processes and embrace the totality of neoliberal governmentality, which leads to a shared sense of confinement to the present structures or a “there-is-no-alternative” mentality (2015, 108). Several other theorists of neoliberalism also detect an overall crisis of political agency, manifested in an increase in anti-political feelings and a disavowal of politics or even the “death of politics” (Glaser 2018). They describe the current moment as the “post-political condition” (see Žižek 2004, 72; Citton 2009, 135) or as a time of political depression (Berlant 2011, 261–262). Maybe the most illuminating thinker in this sense is Franco “Bifo” Berardi (2017), who, in his book *The Soul at Work*, proposes “impotence” as the key concept for understanding the way of living in a time when people globally feel the inability to enact systemic change. He describes older forms of organization and political action as impossible or devalued (2009, 192).

For my research, I find appealing Ajay Singh Chaudhary’s claim about the pervasive sense of exhaustion experienced by people on a global scale (2019). He posits that this exhaustion is not merely a personal or psychological state but an affective atmosphere shaped by the socioeconomic

structures of neoliberalism, which prioritize market logic and individualism over communal well-being and solidarity. I see the neoliberal exhaustion in the post-Yugoslav context as inseparable from the material conditions of life marked by post-socialist privatization and the exploitative capitalist mode of production, including its lack of leisure and rest. Privileging the “now” thus means acknowledging the expressive practice of collective singing in relation to the exhaustion that structures our everyday lives after Yugoslavia. In my interactions with choir members, our conversations revolve around the power of singing activism to engage them by embodied, sensorial means, something they often refer to as “energy” or “drive.” They claim that singing and listening to songs about revolutionary class struggles intervenes in the social atmosphere of hopelessness and brings people together against apathy. Their accounts reveal how it is possible to recuperate socialism in the now through affective engagement with the historical song repertoire.

As scholars of the “affective turn” write, we cannot ignore sensory engagements when understanding the realm of the sociopolitical. To search for an escape from a conventional idea of politics, they turn to affective intensities available in everyday life as neglected but fundamental dimensions of political and social structure (Ahmed 2004; Protevi 2009; Murphie and Bertelsen 2010, 139).⁵¹ Affect mobilizes people to stand together, regardless of social and political positioning or identity, as is well researched in the case of new social movements (see, e.g., Alexandrakis 2016; LaBelle 2018). Such political registers are grounded in the idea of “affective sociality” (Straw 1991; Raffles 2002), based on the premise that the fabric of social relationships is deeply rooted in sensory experiences generated by music and sound in each particular spatiotemporal moment.⁵²

Elsewhere, I argue that we cannot reduce affect to a universalized, embodied intensity that moves among multiple registers—discursive, cognitive, and visceral (Hofman 2015c; 2020a). This approach sheds light on the aural experience and its political potentiality as profoundly shaped by concrete sociopolitical and historical contexts.⁵³ In this book, I examine the

⁵¹ Brian Massumi’s understanding of affective politics stands as a counterpoint to or critique of ideology (2015). For a discussion about the affect-ideology binary, see Chapter 6.

⁵² See Goodman 2010; Porcello et al. 2010; Thompson and Biddle 2013; McCann 2013; Ochoa Gautier 2014; Voegelin 2014; Born, Lewis, and Straw 2017; Cusick 2017; LaBelle 2018.

⁵³ Gray 2013; Tatro 2014; Hofman 2015c; Gill 2017; Sprengel 2019; Guilbault 2019; Desai-Stephens 2020; Garcia 2015; 2020; 2023; García Molina 2020; Garland 2020. For reviews of the literature in this field, see Hofman 2015c; 2020a; Desai-Stephens and Reissnour 2020; Graber and Sumera 2020; Klette-Bohler et al. 2023.

affective capacity of singing activism as essentially constituted by and constitutive of the current economic, social, and political reality. While I focus on the “energy” or “drive” of collective singing that appears in the accounts of choir members as a force that opens a possibility to be and act with others, I do not simply praise affect’s potential in spontaneous, emerging, or fleeting moments of coming together. I see it as a structural basis for everyday sociopolitical organizing with all the ambiguities, constraints, and discomforts posited by the capitalist mode of production.⁵⁴ I will return to this discussion in the book’s final chapter.

Strategic Amateurism

Although calling themselves choirs (*horovi* and *zborovi*),⁵⁵ these collectives play with the traditional idea and concept of a choir or chorus. In our interactions, I come across the various terms the members use to describe the specific organizational structure of those singing collectives, such as “self-organized choirs,” “alternative choirs,” “partisan choirs,” “anti-fascist choirs,” “punk choirs,” “choralband,” or even “choirllective” (bringing together the words “choir” and “collective”). It attests that activist choirs embrace an open participation and consensus decision-making. Scholars usually identify such forms of social organizing as do-it-yourself (DIY), cultural activities based on the principles of participation, bottom-up initiatives, and alternative knowledge production, which promulgate anti-commercial and anti-capitalist ethics (McKay 1998; Wehr 2012; Verbuč 2018). As a collective activity that engages people regardless of their musical skill or training and strives for a cooperative ethos, post-Yugoslav choirs can easily fall under this label. However, I would argue that this conceptual framework fails to capture how singing activism is informed by specific historical legacies, overtly mobilizing a discourse of class solidarity, social ownership, and socialist cultural infrastructure. For this reason, in analyzing singing activism I acknowledge the context-specific perspective that questions the binary between

⁵⁴ About the similar approach, see the works of Mazzarella 2009; Reber 2016; White 2017; Hofman 2020a; Garland 2020; Hofman and Petrović 2023.

⁵⁵ The use of the term “choir” instead of “chorus” derives from the fact that the distinction between the two, common in English-speaking contexts, is not common in Slavic languages. The term *zbor* is mainly used in the Western parts of former Yugoslavia. It is of Slavic origin and also has a meaning of meeting/gathering/assembly.

alternative cultural practices and institutional structures implied through the conceptual framework of DIY.

While its notion will unfold for readers throughout the book, what I call *strategic amateurism* is a performative practice and organizational structure that activist choirs nurture. It is crucial for collective organizing that challenges the idea of talent or expertise as the ultimate precondition of artistic expression. However, choirs are not simply collectives that gather amateurs—people without musical knowledge or singing skills. Instead, they contest professionalization, which is the core of capitalist social relations. As I will show in Chapter 5, the strategic amateurism of activist choirs is embedded in the distinct features of the Yugoslav socialist project, which breaks new ground in advancing its political relevance in the contemporary crisis of neoliberal capitalism.

Before I present the intervention that I strive to make by pursuing the conceptual framework of strategic amateurism, I will briefly turn to the contemporary debates surrounding the amateur–professional nexus. In music scholarship, the term “amateur musician” appears as a complex category used to differentiate people whose musical activities are not their essential source of income or livelihood and who participate out of “love.” Ruth Finnegan, building on musicians’ perspectives, portrays amateur music more diversely, writing that some “regard music as their only real employment (with varying success in terms of the monetary return), some value it as an enjoyable but serious recreation outside work, and some read it as a part-time occupation for the occasional fee” (2007, 12). She concludes that amateur music is “rather a label than a distinction” (2007, 18), while the amateur–professional relationship is a complex continuum that can also involve making an emotional claim and a political statement. Similarly, in his extensive work with musicians in Afghanistan, John Baily makes distinctions between professional (*kesbi*) and amateur (*shauqi*) status, but only to say that this dichotomy is not sustainable in practice because, for self-taught enthusiasts, music is usually also a source of livelihood (2016, 34). Regarding choral singing, amateurism is a widespread term, particularly within the field of “community singing,” which I deal with in Chapter 2.

The growing scholarly interest in the political aspects of amateurism in the last decade has prompted scholars to describe such interest as the age of amateurism or the “amateur turn” (Holdsworth, Milling, and Nicholson 2017; Bryan-Wilson and Piekut 2020). In their introductory article to the thematic issue dedicated to this topic, Julia Bryan-Wilson and Benjamin Piekut define

amateurism as an unstable category that denotes various practices and cultural productions associated with nonprofessional or anti-professional activities. Taking a global approach, they offer a nuanced account of how amateurism has been historically attached to the categories of lack of skill or expertise, “vernacular” and “low” cultural production, and self-organized, improvised aesthetic intervention. For this reason, amateurism has been employed as the fertile ground for different ideological projects and power hierarchies based on gender, race, and class. In its dynamic and diverse application, amateurism, the authors claim, has shaped “non-remunerated, self-organised, unofficial, anti-ruling class insurgent artistic efforts, to programmatic state efforts to marshal ‘folk’ production into national narratives of ‘authentic’ belonging” (Bryan-Wilson and Piekut 2020, 8).

The renewed engagement with amateurism emerged from the need to enrich our understanding of the sociopolitical relations based on expertise that are at the center of the neoliberal production of subjectivity. This book joins such efforts to intervene in the debates about the “professionalized reality” dominating contemporary social, economic, political, and academic lives (Merrifield 2018). My epistemological apparatus draws on the Yugoslav socialist legacies of amateurism as a new organizational and funding model aimed at profoundly transforming all spheres of life. In his writings on culture and arts, Lenin argues that culture should uplift the masses as the way to prepare them for the role of key actors in the creation of the new socialist social relations (1950). This process entails making up for what the working class in capitalism has been deprived of, being completely enslaved by the narrow specialization of the modes of production (Lenin in Zihlerl 1958, 969).

In my examination, I argue that if we want to discuss amateurism as a productive field for reimagining the capitalist model, we must embrace neglected historical experiences. The motivation behind this claim is the dominance of the theorizations that promulgate a view on amateurism as a noninstitutional activity “from below” that serves as a corrective to professionalized culture and is directed toward lower social strata or marginalized groups or individuals, which is deeply embedded in the Western/Anglophone context and the capitalist modes of production. Despite sharing the same emphasis on participatory ethos, socialist cultural-artistic amateurism (*kulturno-umetnički amaterizam* in Serbo-Croatian and *kulturno-umetniški amaterizem* in Slovenian) stood at the center of the emancipation of all social strata, which is of critical importance for building the social relations on

a new basis. Such a perspective, I believe, offers a fresh ground for understanding the political potential of amateurism today.

In socialist Yugoslavia, the category of the amateur was at the center of systemic transformation toward a sociopolitical organization based on socially owned means of production. During the PLS, the so-called cultural-educational work (*kulturno-prosvetni rad*) was essential to the emancipation of partisan fighters. Increasing their intellectual and artistic capacities meant improving literacy and supporting the cultural and artistic activities in partisan units.⁵⁶ The cultural activities organized in the liberated territories, particularly from the second half of 1943 until the end of World War II in Yugoslavia in 1945, laid the groundwork for a future socialist culture policy rejecting a bourgeois idea of culture as something reserved for particular classes. After the war, the official culture politics not only presupposed nationalizing institutions and fostering social ownership but also established an infrastructure of cultural associations, cultural centers, and houses as spaces for practicing new models of participatory activities. Simultaneously, as Branislav Jakovljević writes, the performing arts, including theater and music, were moved into factories and onto the streets of the cities and village squares (2016, 9).

It is important to note that Yugoslav self-managed culture was not limited to workers' culture but was an inclusive category that fostered class-based consciousness (Rihtman-Auguštin 1971). Its implementation unfolded at the intersection of official party rhetoric and everyday practices (Koroman 2016, 616), while its understanding and practical application changed over time. Predrag Matvejević writes about cultural self-management as a twofold concept: first, a mode of social organization and, second, a cultural policy that seeks to create a new (socialist) life (1979, 185–86). What he calls “self-managing technology” encompasses building the various organizational and structural mechanisms of decision-making, on the one hand, and the transformation of sociocultural consciousness, on the other.⁵⁷ Amateurism was thus “a new force” of “an adjustment of individual and social interest” (Majstorović 1972, 28), with the social ownership at the center of this transformation, in opposition to a capitalist privatized economy. The Yugoslav

⁵⁶ On musical life in the PLS, see Pejović 1965; Hercigonja 1972; Jelić, Rihtman-Auguštin, and Zaninović 1975; Tomašek 1982; Križnar 1992; Hofman 2004.

⁵⁷ He also reflects on a number of ambiguities and contradictions in the practical application of self-management, looking especially at the discrepancies between its declared and achieved goals, its rhetoric and practice, and its relationship between flexibility and dogmatism (Matvejević 1979).

sociologist Rudi Supek, writing about the danger of privatization, sees the systemic forms of amateurism as having a key role in building the socialist community (*socijalistička zajednica*) (1974, 16).

In my previous work, I show that the Yugoslav official discourse frames amateur activities not simply as improving people's artistic capacities per se but as a way to act in the social world and practice cooperation, solidarity, and comradeship. Not neglecting the limits and failures of socialist project, I question the interpretations that consider cultural amateurism an imposed, state-controlled project (Hofman 2011c, 38–39). I demonstrate how such views stem from the state–people dichotomy (see Grůň 2018) and are completely ignorant of self-managed culture as actualizing the rhetoric of active, engaged working people who are both the object and the subject of emancipation (Gabrič 1991, 492).⁵⁸ I argue for acknowledging the nuances of the socialist approach to culture and arts and the importance of the epistemological framework that critically engages with capitalist commodification, alienation, and exploitation.

In the following chapters, I discuss how activist choirs' strategic engagement with the amateur position is crucial to their singing (about) socialism: a counterresponse to a reality marked by the exploitative labor patterns and the alienation and commodification that structures all spheres of life in the neoliberal nation-state. Instead of the self-care industry, singing activism exposes the lack of systemic care for leisure and the infrastructures for free, public cultural activities. Furthermore, the recuperation of the socialist cultural amateurism demonstrates the enduring significance of the modes of production that enable decent work and leisure, revealing the shortcomings of neoliberal promise.

Socialism Now, however, stands beyond profound celebratory views of singing (about) socialism. Rather than promises, it exposes strategies: the adjective “strategic” attached to amateurism indicates the context in which choir members face the constant need to deal with the burden of the dismissal of the political value of the Yugoslav socialist project and the discrediting of any positive reference to socialism. Another burden comes from the presumed

⁵⁸ In exploring how the category of self-management is historically tied to a wide range of political ideas associated with labor movements, Branislav Jakovljević compared Yugoslav workers' self-management and the French concept of *autogestion* (as suggested by Henry Lefebvre), as both derive from the same historical legacy of Marx and Engels's writings on workers' self-organization in the Paris Commune. While Yugoslavia was the first-ever attempt to systemically introduce self-management as a form of economic and sociopolitical organization, the idea of *autogestion* sees the state as a constraining force erected above society as a whole (2016, 5–6).

limited efficacy of singing (or any other expressive practices) to intervene in the political arena and substantially contribute to political struggles. My emphasis on strategizing shifts the focus from clear political ideas and stances toward the much more intricate picture of what it means to sing (about) socialism today. In doing that, I tend to ethnographically capture the strategies for revitalizing the neglected or rejected historical legacy of non-professional expressive activities, which build communal forms of life from a class-based perspective.⁵⁹ Activists' recuperation of the socialist ethos as a structural condition in which resources are available to anyone regardless of their social position is an intervention into the contemporary mechanisms of privatized, profit-driven forms of life. Furthermore, I see evoking the idea of cultural activities as playing an essential role in the structural envisioning of the anti-capitalist social formations as particularly potent, as it brings back the categories of culture, leisure, and class in the discussion, often discarded in the contemporary debates as "overburdened" or "old-fashioned" concepts. Therefore, *Socialism Now* engages with the debates and anxieties that shape activist choirs' endeavors to make socialism politically relevant today.

To summarize, I believe that a theoretical investment in strategic amateurism sheds new light on our understanding of expressive practices and their political potential. It raises many important questions about reimagining politics in the condition of neoliberal exhaustion. It does not overshadow the limits and dead ends of such reimaginings; moreover, it helps us think about collective singing as an intervention in a neoliberal reality haunted by the incapacity of any substantial structural intervention into the existing order. Thus, it offers a perspective on the transformative potential of expressive practices in the multilayered intersections between the past, present, and future, the imagined and the real, the exception and the everyday, and the emerging and the routinized.

In the next chapter, I situate the phenomenon of singing activism in relation to other forms of activism and engage with the activist choirs as laboratories of self-organization fueled by the historical legacies of the Yugoslav revolution. The strategies choir members use to navigate authority based on musical knowledge are a way to sustain the collective and nurture

⁵⁹ When referring to the phrase "the production of life," I draw on Judith Butler's theoretical framework of life as inherently attached to the body, but at the same time de-biologized. The body is simultaneously the vessel of life and a social category, as it is never exclusively one's own. She categorizes various forms of life and life statuses, as well as processes of naturalizing and denaturalizing life. For more about the concept of life in Judith Butler's thought, see Zaharijević and Milutinović Bojanić 2017.

ideas of equality that also have performative consequences. As an aural practice, choirs' strategic amateurism revitalizes the historical voice of revolutionary masses that fought for equality, encapsulated in the phrase "all in one voice." Singing partisan, workers', and revolutionary songs is a way of transmitting the sensorium of the revolutionary moment and giving a new aural life to class solidarity in the region (Chapter 3). The recuperation of partisan songs in the present, however, reveals complex histories and memories attached to the socialist past, the question of nostalgia, and the affective potential of collective singing in reconnecting with the legacies of the Yugoslav socialist project, as I explore in Chapter 4. These legacies take on new meanings through the process of re-listening to the past to channel shared vulnerability and dissatisfaction caused by the privatized, profit-oriented, and consumerist forms of life, which are central to my interest in Chapter 5. There, I discuss how the strategic amateurism of activist choirs aims to challenge social relations based on professionalization and to regain the power of cultured leisure in the face of exploitative material conditions of labor. In the book's final chapter, which also serves as the conclusion, I explore what makes singing (about) socialism politically relevant now. Choir members embrace the discourse of anti-fascism, which provides a more efficient way to distill socialist ideas from the past to imagine the future and to make the socialist past valid for contemporary political use. This strategy simultaneously uncovers the complicated coexistence between lived and imagined socialism as meeting in the now.

Singing (as) Activism

It has been a week since the festival *Sve u jedan glas* (All in One Voice), and Julijana, an organizer, member, and conductor of *Le Zbor*, shares her impressions with intense passion: “When I recollect now, it was a wonderful experience. We needed that reunion to remember that we have a purpose. And that actually, we all share the same problems.”¹ She recounts that, for *Le Zbor*, which went through a very vulnerable phase after almost all the long-term members left, the gathering proved to be a much-needed uplift for the newcomers, helping them bond. The occasion for the festival was the celebration of the choir’s thirteenth anniversary and included a concert, street singing, an exhibition, and the screening of two documentary films.² As with the first two All in One Voice festivals in Belgrade in 2011 and Ljubljana in 2013, the 2018 iteration gathered activist choirs from all over former Yugoslavia under the slogan “Stay Loud.” The festival’s slogan, which alludes to singing as an expression of disobedience, aimed to inspire people to stand together against the current sociopolitical order. “As long as we can sing and be active, there is hope for improvement,” asserted *Le Zbor* members in their interview before the event (Parežanin 2018). As the phrase “all in one voice” indicates, the festival strongly promoted post-Yugoslav solidarities and an awareness that people in the region share the same problems and, therefore, should fight by joining forces.

In contrast to the previous two festivals, this time the title used the feminine form *sve* (instead of the generic male *svi*, in Serbo-Croatian; *vse/vsi*, in Slovenian) as a reaction to gender bias and sexism in language that perpetuates and reproduces social inequalities.³ Such a shift is understandable since,

¹ Julijana, interview by the author, June 2, 2018, online.

² One film was about the previous, second festival of activist choirs in Ljubljana, and the other was about *Le Zbor*. See more about the documentaries in footnote 14.

³ The norm according to which masculine nouns and pronouns are often used generically to refer to both men and women in many languages. In Slavic languages with their rich grammatical gender, such forms are pervasive (far more visible than, e.g., in English) and, therefore, subject to much debate. Gender-equality activists and feminist-oriented linguists and intellectuals argue that such language ideology subtly reproduces the unequal power relationships associated with the corresponding

from its founding, Le Zbor has served as a sanctuary where many women who identify as lesbian, cisgender, or transgender feel safe to express their voices and share their ideas. The Le Zbor members' call to "stay loud" thus also aimed to reclaim stereotypes about loud feminists "as an intervention in the patriarchal, Catholic, conservative, hegemonic, and nationalist political environment" (Jakovljević 2018). By reappropriating a misogynous expression, members underlined the power of feminist voices in organizing against nationalistic, xenophobic, homophobic, and transphobic politics.

Julijana cannot hide her happiness that the festival produced an atmosphere of sharing and unity. People she met found the atmosphere very emotional. Some of them were on the brink of tears: "Honestly, I do not know from where this emotion comes," she continues, "and it started from the first moment—the very first tone performed by the Domaćigosti choir." I learn that two members of this choir, Afghan refugees, did not manage to come because they had to leave Zagreb after the multiple rejections of their applications for asylum in Croatia. Therefore, the Domaćigosti performance became even more emotional: "During their whole performance, I felt a lump in my throat." Another intense moment was when the entire audience chanted the song "¡Ay Carmela!" Julijana describes this experience with a trembling voice, saying, "My whole body was shaking." The festival's closing was arranged as street singing of "The Internationale" in front of the venue and was, in her opinion, the whole event's emotional climax. The mass voice of choristers chanting in different languages (Slovenian, Serbo-Croatian, German) that resounded on the square, she says, completely justified the title of the festival: "We managed to unite all the choirs so that we really sounded *all in one voice*, sharing emotion, and being in the same frequency."⁴

* * *

What does it mean to be a singing activist? How are post-Yugoslav activist choirs organized, and what are their main activities? In this chapter, I provide ethnographic insight into collective singing as a form of political

gender roles. Over the last decade, there have been several attempts to change the dominant language politics through various actions, projects, and interventions (including policy proposals for equal use of both the feminine and masculine forms, the use of hyphens, etc.), which still tend to stand out as deliberate linguistic intervention. See more in Filipović 2011; Bogetić Pejović 2022.

⁴ Julijana, interview by the author, June 2, 2018, online. Emphasis mine.

engagement. I situate activist choirs within the global phenomenon of engaged, political, and activist choirs and discuss their specific musical and organizational features. Choir members bring collective singing to post-Yugoslav urban spaces, employing it as an efficient tool for contesting the sociopolitical restructuring after the collapse of socialism. At the center of my examination is their dedication to evoking the leftist and anti-fascist ethos with the song repertoire, public actions, and media appearances against the privatization of urban space and ethnicization of public memory landscapes.

Further, I focus on self-organization (*samoorganizacija*), which denotes choirs' organizational and performative practice based on open participation and consensus decision-making. While those characteristics are common to many contemporary autonomous collectives and cooperative movements, my account shows how the post-Yugoslav approach to self-organization recalls the experience of amateur cultural activities in the PLS and the post-World War II model of Yugoslav cultural self-management. Along with examining these historically imbued practices, I offer an ethnographic description of the relationship between the "musical" and "nonmusical" aspects of singing activism, informed by contradictions and strategic (re)negotiations of members' agency based on presumed musical skills.

Finally, I describe the specific improvisational, ad hoc performative practice that constitutes the choirs' strategic amateurism. I ask: what counts as an authority among choir members, and how does it affect the practice of self-organization, particularly among people with diverse musical skills and various levels of musical training? How does rehearsal, as an aesthetic practice based on spontaneity and improvisation, form the basis for communal activist engagement?

Post-Yugoslav Singing Encounters

"Collectively raising a voice is the first step toward change," Horkestar members begin their interview with the Bosnian online portal *Urban* magazine, advocating singing as a form of activism and empowering people to join choirs (Zablocki 2020). The main occasion for this media exposure is their singing at the celebration of the seventy-fifth anniversary of the liberation of Stolac (Bosnia and Herzegovina) from fascist occupation, where they arrive

from Belgrade on the invitation of the local Association of Anti-fascists.⁵ Having a performance in another post-Yugoslav country is, for them, an act of nurturing regional connections and solidarities that the political elites in power had systematically erased:

The tragic ethnic wars of the 1990s have left and [will] leave a negative impact on tens of generations. Many of our young people today regard the other nations of the former Yugoslavia as enemies. Faith and ethnic identity have been points of division and conflict for a long time. It is very important for us to connect with like-minded anti-fascists from all over the former Yugoslavia and beyond and to remember that our ancestors fought against a common enemy and won. (Zablocki 2020)

As this statement illustrates, the violent dissolution of Yugoslavia resulted in the rise of militant nationalism in all spheres of life that stigmatized the common past and culture. The shared music market dissolved, which created a terrain for the further segregation of culture and music along ethnic lines. Despite the significant efforts of a small group of musicians and bands to keep connections and oppose nationalistic madness,⁶ particularly at the beginning of the 1990s, many former colleagues and friends in the music industry openly expressed enmity toward each other. At the same time, new cultural politics divided musical genres according to their “ethnic” features.⁷ Since the beginning of the 2000s, musicians, activists, and scholars have become more vocal in their efforts to reestablish cross-border cooperation that opposes the national(istic) approach to culture.

Able to actively participate in these reconnections, I observed the power of music- and sound-related activities in dealing with painful memories, divisions, and despair. When I first met people from Horkeškart (later Horkestar), we had a common goal—to promote shared Yugoslav legacies as a response to nationalism and ethnic divisions. They undertook their first tour to Croatia soon after the choir was founded in 2001 (see Figure 2.1) and became one of the first artistic groups to perform in what, until recently,

⁵ The commemoration gathered around 500 people from all parts of the former Yugoslavia, as well as representatives of the Italian Communist Party.

⁶ Just to name some of them, KUD Idijoti, Đorđe Balašević, Hladno Pivo.

⁷ One of the telling and the most explored examples of this division was the case of *gusle* and *tambura*, the chordophone instruments reinterpreted as exclusively Serbian (former) and Croatian (latter) traditional heritage and employed in building new models of ethnic culture in the region. For more on this, see Sugarman 1997; Pettan 1998; Rasmussen 2002; Baker 2010; Kozorog and Muršič 2018; and Beard and Rasmussen 2020, among others.



Figure 2.1 Horkeštar's tour to Croatia in 2001, performance in Labin, Istria. Author Vanja Bjelobaba, courtesy of the Škart archive.

had been “enemy territory.” The death of former Croatian president Franjo Tuđman in 1999 and the extradition of Slobodan Milošević to The Hague War Crimes Tribunal in 2001 marked a new phase of reconciliation in the relationship between Serbia and Croatia. These two countries had still not reestablished institutional cultural cooperation at that time, making the choir’s journey particularly audacious. “Memories of the Yugoslav Wars were still vividly present,” says Prota almost twenty years later in our conversation.⁸ He recollects how the friends who hosted them were cautious about how and where to organize street singing and concerts to avoid potential incidents.⁹ For him, the most powerful experience was the warm welcome from the audience and the intense feeling of reconnecting with people whom the media had presented as enemies. He adds that their hosts and audiences were thrilled to see them dressed in blue-collar workers’ uniforms¹⁰ and singing the repertoire that triggered memories of socialist Yugoslavia.

⁸ Prota, interview by the author, October 28, 2019, Belgrade.

⁹ Just after the Yugoslav Wars were over, nationalistic fervor was still high. For the reestablishing of musical connections between the two countries, see Baker 2010, 184–188.

¹⁰ Such uniforms are characteristic of Horkeškar but are also the representative outfit of other choirs, such as Le Zbor members’ red worker jumpsuits or the blue workers’ *kecelje* of the members

The idea, indeed, was to sing songs dedicated to reconstruction and rebuilding (*pesme obnove i izgradnje*), the repertoire associated with various types of voluntary labor activities called the Youth Labor Actions (Omladinske radne akcije) in the early post–World War II years.¹¹ In Prota's words, the historical moment of building a new socialist society and its massive infrastructures should have symbolically recalled the initial enthusiasm of the newly established Yugoslav brotherhood and unity and solidarity among Yugoslav nations. Apart from that repertoire, Horkeškart also performed partisan songs from different parts of Yugoslavia and pieces by Arsen Dedić, Aleksandar Tišma, and Voki Kostić—all Yugoslav authors and songwriters.¹² He says they received the same warm welcome on the tours in Montenegro (2002) and Macedonia (2003) in the following two years.¹³

Prota's account is one of many similar stories I hear about activist choirs' performances in different parts of the former Yugoslavia. Such performances intensified after 2011, alongside a wave of regional protests against the political elite, widening socioeconomic inequalities, the lack of public-interest policies, and the rise of xenophobia and fascism, as described at the beginning of the book. Since then, the activist choirs have regularly organized mutual visits and joint activities, such as public rehearsals, street singing, concerts, and protests. The festivals organized in different post-Yugoslav cities are special moments of reunion, shared cross-border togetherness, and celebrations of singing activism. In 2011, Horkestar hosted the first All in One Voice (Svi u glas) Festival at the Cultural Center Rex and the Belgrade Youth Center. All choirs active at that moment—Le Zbor (Zagreb), Kombinat (Ljubljana), Raspeani Skopjani (Skopje), and Le wHORE, Proba, and Horkestar (Belgrade)—gathered for the first time since their foundation. In the festival's announcement, the organizers wrote that the long-existing idea “to bring choirs together in one place, present to the audience, exchange

of Hor 29. Novembar. Kombinat members wear T-shirts with a rendering of Che Guevara as a woman, while Praksa members sing in red shirts emblazoned with the name of the choir. Horkestar members see costumes as an important feature of choirs' visual expression of activist engagement. They are made in accordance with their “alternative” orientation and are therefore “unusual and improvised” (Milinković et al. 2015, 26).

¹¹ Labor actions continued at fluctuating frequency until the end of Yugoslavia. For more, see Matošević 2015; Senjković 2016.

¹² Continuing this practice, in May 2015, Horkestar arranged and recorded the song “To Survive,” originally performed by the band KUD Idijoti from Rijeka, Istria (Croatia), for their compilation: “For you—a tribute to KUD Idijoti” (Milinković et al. 2015, 21).

¹³ Prota, interview by the author, October 28, 2019, Belgrade.

experiences and ideas and come up with some future joint actions” had finally come to reality. Concerts and street singing took place for several days, organized solely by the choir members, though with the financial support of several alternative cultural organizations to cover the costs of travel, food, and accommodation (see Figure 2.2). The festival program also included a screening of a documentary about Le Zbor (*Bože čuvaj Le Zbor/God Save Le Zbor*, 2009) and a short film about Horkestar’s performance (*Početak bune na dahije/The Beginning of the Revolt against the Dahijas*, 2009).¹⁴

Horkestar’s webpage notes that the festival aims to elevate the existing collaboration among the choirs to a new level and to advocate singing as a form of activism. They encourage people to take the power of one’s voice seriously, as it “does not take much to express, but has a lot to offer” and “maybe join them one day.”¹⁵



Figure 2.2 The street performances at the first festival of activist choirs, Belgrade, 2011. Author Iva Čukić, courtesy of Nevena Paunović.

¹⁴ The practice would continue during the following two festivals, held in Ljubljana and Zagreb. *Kombinat* is also portrayed in two films—*Kombinat* (2015) and *Sing Along* (2019)—while another film is dedicated to the Second Festival of Self-Organized Choirs organized in Ljubljana—*Vsi v en glas!*/in their English translation *All as one!* (2017). In terms of other ways of presenting their activities, in 2015, an exhibition opened in Belgrade to mark the fifteenth anniversary of the choir Horkeškart/Horkestar (see Milinković et al. 2015) while the members of Hor 29. Novembar organized an exhibition about their activities as part of the Festival of Activist Choirs (FAC) in 2019 in Vienna.

¹⁵ “Svi u glas” (n.d.).

Choir members emphasize that singing can be an important channel of collective political expression. Their performances at protests and rallies sustains the spirit and enthusiasm and contributes to the “organization of time” and dramaturgy as a prerequisite for the protest’s success. On many occasions, I witness how choirs encourage people to join protests, helping them channel accumulated feelings. At some moments, it even changes the course of the protests, like during the Refugees Welcome protest in Ljubljana in 2015, when Kombinat’s singing of a well-known partisan piece prevents the violent confrontation between protesters and the police. Confused by the cheerful marching rhythm of the song “*¡Ay Carmela!*,”¹⁶ the confronted sides stop arguing, which helps calm the tensions and shift the heated atmosphere into a peaceful sing-along. Le Zbor members illustrate that well in one of their interviews, saying that “singing in a choir, especially in a public space, gives you the opportunity to be spontaneous, to react swiftly, something that other forms of activism don’t offer” (Prtoric 2016).

Singing as Urban Activism

Many other choirs and singing collectives that have emerged across the globe in the last twenty years share the same strivings as post-Yugoslav choirs: to advocate singing as a form of activism and its potential to foster people’s social and political engagement. Examining street, political, radical, and campaign choirs (Reimer and Mason 2016), several scholars have shown that singing is increasingly part of socially engaged movements and activism worldwide. Unlike choirs created to cherish the classical Western canon of choral singing, authors claim that politically engaged choirs focus on mission and purpose, including fighting for particular individual or group rights or global causes.¹⁷ For instance, in his extensive collaborative research on

¹⁶ I dedicate particular attention to this song in Chapter 4.

¹⁷ Such as the so-called natural voice movement (see Bithell 2014), which acts against any form of social injustice; environmental choirs (the “Choralecology” movement in Australia, see Rickwood 2014; 2017); LGBTQIA+ choirs (see Attinello 2006; Strachan 2006; MacLachlan 2015, 2020; Balén 2017; Hilder 2020a, 2020b, 2023); Indigenous choirs (see Piercey 2012); unemployed and homeless people’s singing groups and the so-called refugee choirs across Europe (see Klebe 2019). For the women’s choral singing in Indonesia, see Weintraub 2021; for other studies of post-Yugoslav activist choirs, see Petrović 2011; Hofman 2016, 2020b, 2021; Reitsamer 2016; Hofman and Reitsamer 2017; Moschitz 2021; Hofman and Duraković 2024.

different types of choirs that use singing to advocate inclusion, economic equality, and peacebuilding, André de Quadros writes about the rapidly changing understanding and practice of choral singing in the late twentieth century, something he calls “a revolution in choral music” (2019, 25). A shift toward political engagement by adopting new repertoires, methods, and performance practices aims at reimagining choral art (2019, 35). Like many other scholars, de Quadros acknowledges the importance of collective singing for health and well-being and explores the role of choirs as therapeutic tools for disenfranchised and marginalized individuals or groups. Choral singing is thus not just a tool in the political protests but also a response to structural exclusions, the lack of institutional support and care, and the increasing alienation and social fragmentation. I will further address these aspects in Chapter 5 when discussing the politicization of leisure.

Post-Yugoslav activist choirs are part of the rise of engaged or activist singing collectives, particularly cooperative singing collectives that cultivate an autonomous leftist ethos, for instance, the “revolutionary choirs” in Poland, the “SOAS guerrilla choir” in London, and the New York-based “Sing in Solidarity” network, which has largely remained under the radar of scholarly examinations. Due to their specific organization based on open participation and consensus decision-making, these choirs share a strong anti-capitalist ethos and provide space for critical engagement with the global sociopolitical and economic processes, as well as for the articulation of a new vision of society.

Fueled by the socialist experience, post-Yugoslav singing activism carries a specific approach regarding repertoire and organizational practices. Singing about the Yugoslav anti-fascist resistance and socialist revolution, as the moment of building the new sociopolitical system, enables an intersection of the specific histories of listening, locational, and acoustic contexts with the current sociopolitical realities. Thus, we can attend to the specific trajectories of choral singing in the struggles against diminishing social and workers’ rights, privatization, deepening class stratification, and the recuperation of socialism, which I will elaborate on in the following pages.

Founded in the post-Yugoslav cities, activist choirs carry out most of their activities as interventions in urban space, such as street singing, flash mobs, and public rehearsals in front of neglected World War II monuments and abandoned or privatized factories. Their singing is often part of interventions related to the Right to the City initiatives, such as preventing the eviction of families on gentrified city outskirts, defending squats, or protesting against privatizing previously socially owned spaces and cultural

venues.¹⁸ To confront the consequences of the aggressive transformation of the ownership structure and commodification of life that capitalist accumulation dictates, choirs also organize so-called city anniversary tours. Each choir organizes an annual singing event to intervene in the urban space in its respective city—Pula, Ljubljana, Zagreb, Belgrade, and Vienna. They usually select the repertoire to reclaim suppressed histories and memories erased in spatial and sociopolitical restructuring processes.¹⁹

In 2009, members of Hor 29. Novembar organized one of the first anniversary tours in Vienna on November 29, the official date of the founding of socialist Yugoslavia.²⁰ The long history of migration from Yugoslavia since the 1960s has given Vienna the status of the largest post-Yugoslav city outside the region,²¹ informing the specific strategies that choir members implement in celebrating their choir's anniversary. Dressed in workers' uniforms or wrapped in Yugoslav flags with the red star and wearing red pioneer scarves²² (as in Figure 2.3), the choir opened its street performance with one of the most popular partisan songs, "Po šumama i gorama" (Through valleys and over hills).²³ In our conversation five years later, Aleksandar, a cofounder of the choir, explains that this was their first public performance, envisioned as a celebration of the fortieth anniversary of the Yugoslav *Gastarbeiter* club²⁴ Mladi radnik (Young Worker), founded in 1969 by the International Club of Young Yugoslavs.²⁵ The venue was abandoned after the breakup of Yugoslavia when the club ceased to exist. Singing in this location aimed to revive the Yugoslav space of memory (*lieu de mémoire*) and the histories of Yugoslav *Gastarbeiter* in Vienna.

¹⁸ The neoliberal restructuring of formerly socially owned spaces, particularly in terms of cultural infrastructure, will receive more attention in Chapter 4.

¹⁹ On collective singing and listening to the Yugoslav partisan song repertoire in public spaces as a specific form of sonic memory intervention, see Hofman and Atanasovski 2017; Hofman 2021.

²⁰ Dan republike (the Day of the Republic) on November 29 was the second-most important state holiday in socialist Yugoslavia after Dan mladih (the Day of Youth) on May 25.

²¹ At the beginning of 2021, Vienna's population included 180,000 former Yugoslavs; see "Vienna's Population 2021" (n.d.).

²² The word "pioneer" refers to a child belonging to the pioneer organization from elementary school until adolescence. Pioneer organizations existed in many socialist societies around the globe. In Yugoslavia, the children's organization Pioneer Alliance of Yugoslavia was founded during the PLS in 1942 as a body that gathered children to foster their socialist education. It lasted until the breakup of Yugoslavia. For more on the category pioneer and its role in socialist Yugoslavia, see Duda 2015. The pioneer organization was also active in Austria, and the children of Yugoslav working migrants also regularly entered this socialist organization.

²³ I further explore the song in Chapter 4.

²⁴ *Gastarbeiter* ("guest worker") is a term designating foreigners coming to work in Western Europe (especially in West Germany, Austria, and Switzerland). For the history of *Gastarbeiter*, see Bernard 2019.

²⁵ Aleksandar, interview by the author, January 5, 2014, Vienna.



Figure 2.3 Hor 29. Novembar performing in front of Mladi radnik, Vienna, 2009. Courtesy of the Hor 29. Novembar archive.

In the following years, the anniversary tour became a regular part of the choir's activities, its primary goal being to raise awareness about the official neglect and erasure of the history of working migrations and to respond to the rise of anti-immigrant policy and structural exclusion.²⁶ I observed how choir members chose different locations every year and often changed them during the tour, making their singing interventions spontaneous, unpredictable, and situation dependent. They, however, also stuck with some regular performing spots, such as the bus stations Erdberg and Simmering, key Vienna entry points for guest workers from the post-Yugoslav region looking for better economic opportunities, and the subway stations Praterstern and Ottakring, located in Vienna's migrant districts. Therefore, the choir members remain dedicated to resounding the marginalized spaces in the official memorial landscape—mundane spaces of daily transit, migrant neighborhoods, and taverns on the city's

²⁶ This exclusion from the city's official memorial landscapes and soundscapes is a long-term focus of ethnomusicologists researching music and minorities in Vienna; see Hemetek 2007; 2012.

outskirts as spaces of migrants' socializing or in murky streets away from the polished parts of the city. In her study of *Hor 29. Novembar*, Rosa Reitsamer writes that the choir raises questions about the exclusion of the cultural and political activities of working migrants from Austria's official cultural heritage discourses, reframing them as a threat to national cohesion (2016, 66, 68).

The issue of suppressed memories also occurred in my conversation with choir members. After one of the choir's rehearsals, Thomas tells me that the choir's interventions serve as a reconnection with the lost city soundscapes, especially the pre-World War II anti-fascist and labor movements: "We sing 'The Internationale,' as people in the past did in Vienna."²⁷ Jana shares his stance, adding that the anniversary tour reveals or brings back the lost sounds as an "interruption" in the urban space. "The goal is to challenge the invisible borders in the city," she adds, referring to a situation during their 2017 tour when the authorities did not allow them to sing at the Erdberg subway station as it was a private, company-owned space.²⁸ Choir members believe that the very act of singing interrupts the invisible borders of urban regimes structured by financial logic and the mechanisms of the neoliberal nation-state. Yet singing songs about social and workers' rights in privatized spaces adds an additional layer to this intervention as it points out the class geography of growing social inequities, privatization, and gentrification (Vilenica 2015).

The strategies of the anniversary tours and other singing interventions testify to a specific co-creation of sound and space: the capacity of the audible force of collective singing simultaneously creates and interrupts shared social spaces. When I attended the choirs' singing interventions, they were usually full of exclamations and occasional shouting and clapping to increase the listeners' active response and participation to disrupt the pace of "ordinary life." These techniques resonate with Suzanne Cusick's observation about "Occupella," a practice of a cappella singing using unamplified sounds in the Occupy Wall Street Movement, which participants experienced as acoustic energy that circulates and gives human bodies agency (2017, 38). She argues that through the embodied presence of human voices, the human microphone nurtures the possibility of social relations beyond those based on capitalist values and wealth exchange. Due to its ephemerality, she writes, sound

²⁷ Thomas, interview by the author, December 17, 2013, Vienna.

²⁸ Jana, interview by the author, February 15, 2018, online.

cannot drastically move bodies but can still introduce change by bringing people together (2017, 41).

I realize this capacity myself while attending the “Bank Rote Dance” in the space of the (at that time) state-owned Slovenian bank (Nova Ljubljanska banka) on May 9, 2013.²⁹ The “organized guerrilla performance,” as the organizers call it, was an informal celebration of the liberation of Ljubljana in World War II and the Day of Liberation of Europe (or Victory over Fascism Day or Europe Day). The bank was an intentional target: it had renamed itself after Yugoslavia’s disintegration and unlawfully took the savings from citizens of other former Yugoslav republics. Due to the global economic crisis in 2013, the bank announced it would cut its losses by closing down many branches and firing employees while waiting to restructure or privatize.

The “Bank Rote Dance” starts with a performance before the entrance and continues with “occupying” the bank’s interior with the collective singing of the partisan, revolutionary, and workers’ songs. Kombinat members enter the bank dressed in red shirts with the hammer and sickle, singing the famous Spanish Civil War song “No pasarán.” Clerks and clients were shocked by the unexpected sounds that filled the space. Some people present nodded as a sign of support or applauded, while others waited for the song to be over to continue with their work. For the moment, singing succeeded in interrupting the everyday mechanism of the capitalist exchange and the financial sector’s transaction “routine.”

Due to the fleeting and ambiguous nature of sound, however, it happens that, despite the choirs’ clear intentions, a singing intervention does not fulfill its goal. Listeners do not always recognize the purpose or find singing self-evident, which allows choirs’ interventions to be co-opted by or integrated into the city’s soundscapes. One example of this was Praksa’s anniversary tour, envisioned by the members as street singing in Pula’s busy center on a Saturday during peak tourist season. As Edna explains, instead of interrupting the soundscapes of the everyday rhythm of life in the streets of Pula, singing “Bella Ciao” (Goodbye, beautiful)³⁰ amused tourists who came closer to listen and even occasionally sang along. Praksa members were disappointed that their singing did not affect passersby in the desired way and that they perceived the singing as part of the city’s “tourist offer.” Although

²⁹ Organized by the famous theater director and public intellectual Dragan Živadinov, Kombinat’s performance was a part of the wider project R A D A R T #4!; see Anđelković 2013.

³⁰ For more about the important place of this song in the repertoire of activist choirs, see Chapter 6.

Edna does not deny that, in a certain way, the interaction with tourists was a fun experience for the choristers, she confirms that bringing people together through singing needs an agenda.

Singing Self-Organization

What members call self-organization has been central to their activist engagement. They use this term to denote several aspects of the choirs' activities and indicate their independence from any institutionalized framework. This organization model presupposes that most choirs do not have legal status as societies or associations. At the same time, those formally registered usually do not receive institutional funding but function on a volunteer basis, driven by the enthusiasm of their members. Referring to the choirs as self-organized also presumes a unique model of activist engagement through singing, distinct from "classical choirs" and their mainly ceremonial role in political events. In that role, choral performance usually opens and closes political gatherings or commemorations to make the atmosphere or provide sonic accompaniment, while the "real" political actors provide the central content in the form of speeches. Activist choirs, instead, insist on collective singing as the political activity itself, not dependent on the "external" structures. During our conversation, Teja from Kombinat embraces this aspect: "We are not activists who have a choir. We are engaged citizens who use singing as its own kind of activism."³¹

Although this statement initially sounded contradictory, I realize its true meaning by observing choirs' relationship with the activist scenes in the region. Choir members closely cooperate with several movements and activist collectives, such as anarcho-syndicalists, ecological and feminist groups, and Right to the City activists. They regularly participate in and support their protests and rallies. At the same time, choirs maintain (self-)organized actions and interventions, some of which I described in the previous section. Choir members believe this allows them to engage with the most pressing social and political issues, not limited to one particular topic or cause, as is usually the case for conventional activism.³² Most choirs avoid direct attachment

³¹ Teja, interview by the author, March 28, 2013, Koper.

³² Writing about bookshop-café initiatives as everyday activism in post-socialist Serbia, Piotr Goldstein argues that such cultural activities parallel other forms of activism, catalyzing or forming a link between different forms of shorter-lived activism (2017, 1456).

to a particular political or civil organization, except for the choir *Naša pjesma* from Belgrade, which grew within the Marxist organization Marks21.³³ In terms of individual members' political engagement, there are no restrictions; some are active in anarcho-syndicalist and feminist groups or various political platforms and initiatives. For example, several Horkestar members joined *Ne davimo Beograd* (Do not let Belgrade d(r)own), a local political movement "aimed at improving citizens' living and working conditions,"³⁴ an initiative similar to other local municipal movements around the world, such as the *Indignados* movement in Spain. Most choir members, however, do not belong to any activist groups or networks, and a commitment to singing is their primary form of political organizing. We can perhaps find the reasons for such a stance in their need to distance themselves not only from the sectarianism and fractioning typical for activist groups but also the "professionalized" approach to NGO activism. Another reason is the choirs' dedication to acknowledging the historical role of choral singing in political organizing, particularly the one of pre-World War II workers' or the World War II anti-fascist resistance.

For choir members, the partisan movement is a prime model of self-organization and an enduring inspiration. In our conversation, Živa recounts, "Today, I still think that we can apply many experiences from the time of the People's Liberation Struggle—of course with critical consideration—to how we operate here and now. First, the fact that they somehow achieved equality in agreements was impressive."³⁵ Her statement refers to the PLS as a resistance movement that grew from a small number of individuals and groups that decided to resist Nazi occupation and from the members of what was then the illegal Communist Party of Yugoslavia, which later grew into a mass movement. It also refers to the socialist revolutionary strivings to establish the new open-participatory, self-organized cultural activities accessible to all. Members of *Naša pjesma* told me that they draw on the global and regional histories of pre-World War II workers' organizing and especially the cultural activities that supported struggles for workers' rights. Among other groups, choral societies acted as a tool for working-class (self-)identification in the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth centuries. The ones formed in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes

³³ The full name of the organization is the *Revolucionarna socijalistička organizacija Marks21* (Revolutionary Socialist Organization Marks21).

³⁴ "Ne davimo Beograd" (n.d.).

³⁵ Živa, interview by the author, December 27, 2013, online.

(later Kingdom of Yugoslavia) laid the foundation for experimenting with a new approach to culture in the PLS. Due to the political repression and censorship that put additional pressure on any form of radical political action from 1929 on—the banning of the work of the Communist Party, unions, and political rallies and the censorship—singing was a critical channel of keeping the workers’ organizing active, usually through informal meetings. Like the workers’ choirs in North America and Western Europe,³⁶ Workers’ Cultural and Educational Communities in the pre–World War II time of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia organized various cultural and educational events (see Kučinić 2022). These experiences were essential for the further organization of cultural activities in partisan units during World War II based on abandoning the previous bourgeois canon of culture.³⁷ As I explained in the previous chapter, regardless of their musical skills or education, partisan fighters and people in the liberated territories were encouraged to take part in cultural activities as a way of establishing new social formations necessary for building a socialist society.

The choir members’ take on self-organization also recalls the participatory model extending to workers’ self-management, a pillar of Yugoslav socialism. Many of them I talk to feel it necessary to acknowledge this legacy, which has been neglected in public and political discourses. For example, during our conversation in 2013, Teja points out what she calls “a paradox”: “In Yugoslavia, we had self-management that others copied from us, but when we look for alternatives, we do not know how to build on it, as if we are ashamed.” She says it is unwise to apply Western nonhierarchical and cooperative organization models while neglecting “local experience.”³⁸ Prota more directly connects the activities of Horkeškart with the principles of Yugoslav self-management and one of its foremost ideologists, Edvard Kardelj,³⁹ explaining that the choir experiments with self-management in the contemporary context and thus joins several artistic collectives that have also done so in the last twenty years.⁴⁰ However, he realizes such an attempt

³⁶ Scholars interested in the historical workers’ choirs in the United States explore how they were connected to unions (Jacobson 2006; Wolensky 2006; Strachan 2006, 250), as well as to women’s networks and workers’ activities such as strikes and campaigns (Wolensky 2006, 235).

³⁷ For more about the music of working people, see my previous work, Hofman 2008. I also present part of this debate in the next chapter.

³⁸ Teja, interview by the author, March 28, 2013, Koper.

³⁹ Edvard Kardelj, one of the leaders of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia before World War II, was a leading Yugoslav politician, the vice president of SFRY, and the most important figure for developing the Yugoslav self-management model.

⁴⁰ Workers’ self-management has been a source of inspiration for various theorists, scholars, and artists in the last two decades, such as the projects by the artistic groups Kiosk, Škart, and Edicija

demands serious reflection and debate: “First, we had to break down all these prejudices and had several meetings where some members were still not aware of their civic conservatism (*građanski konzervativizam*).”⁴¹

Prota's quote testifies to the hesitation of forthrightly recuperating the legacies of Yugoslav self-management. The way he implicitly questions the liberal position of so-called civil activism reveals the complex and uneasy coexistence between civil society activism and the self-organization of activist choirs. Although in many ways their activities overlap, the members tend to distance themselves from NGOs' activism (also called the civil sector, *civilni sektor*), particularly in the context of post-Yugoslav countries.⁴² This, however, also depends on the particular choir and the stance of its membership. Some of them told me that, like other activist groups in the region, who lost belief in the legitimacy of the civil sector due to dependence on international grants that dictate their agendas,⁴³ they are somewhat cautious when taking part in NGO activities. They are bothered by the “lip service,” a way of declaratively protecting vulnerable and marginalized individuals and communities while actually working for one's own benefit. I often hear them criticizing civil society organizations for taking an approach that does not correspond with actual needs on the ground and the patronizing stance toward local grassroots initiatives. In addition, endorsing their predominantly Western-liberal orientation, NGOs widely neglect or deny the legacies of Yugoslav socialism in addressing the political and social challenges in the region.⁴⁴

This does not mean that choirs do not collaborate with particular NGOs. For example, Hor 29. Novembar has a long-term relationship with the

Jugoslavija and the project *Alternative Economics, Alternative Societies* by Austrian artist Oliver Ressler. Branislav Jakovljević finds that since the beginning of the twenty-first century, the so-called social turn has reimagined the field of art as a space for activism and emancipation, drawing on the legacies of the interwar avant-garde that reemerged in the 1960s and the relational art of the 1990s (2016, 4–6). In my view, activist choirs' self-organization provides a space for decentering the idea of socially engaged art and cultivating the notion of amateurism that diminishes the very division between art and non-art, which I elaborate on at the end of this chapter.

⁴¹ Prota, interview by the author, October 28, 2019, Belgrade.

⁴² In the case of Austria, the NGOs proved to be more independent from the foreign donations and are not necessarily elevated at the level of professionalized service, as in the case of former Yugoslavia (Gligorić 2024).

⁴³ Recently, NGOs have become more dependent on state funding and therefore tend to serve official policy (Razsa 2015, 96).

⁴⁴ The overwhelming presence of NGOs in the post-Yugoslav area is a result of the 1990s ethnic wars. The NGOs are involved in various humanitarian, reconciliation, and human rights activities (Bilić 2012). For a critique of the politics of “NGOization” and the liberal approach to civil activism, see also Stubbs 2012; Razsa 2015; Goldstein 2017.

organization Integrationshaus (Integration House), which helps migrants, refugees, and asylum-seekers; the choir uses the organization's space for rehearsals. The Center for Cultural Decontamination gives rehearsal space to Naša pjesma, while Le Zbor collaborates with several LGBTQIA+ organizations. This reveals the dynamic coexistence between the Western Liberal approach and an attempt to promulgate a class perspective focused on workers and social rights, which is most visible in advocating women's and LGBTQIA+ rights, an important aspect of post-Yugoslav singing activism.

As I indicated in the previous chapter, the majority of the choirs are all-female (Praksa, Le Zbor, Z'borke, and Kombinat). In addition, Z'borke is a feminist choir, and Le Zbor defines itself as a female, mixed, feminist-lesbian choir. Those two choirs are outspokenly feminist in their repertoires, performance settings, and public appearances, standing against sexism, homophobia, and transphobia. They collaborate with various feminist platforms and festivals, such as the International Festival City of Women (Mesto žensk) and Red Dawns (Rdeče zore) in Ljubljana, fACTIV (Zagreb) and BEFEM in Belgrade. I attend several events choirs organize in support of women's reproductive rights, including confronting the prying of anti-abortion initiatives in front of maternity hospitals. As Figure 2.4 depicts, choirs regularly travel in the region in support



Figure 2.4 Z'borke street singing during the rally against sexism, Ljubljana, 2014. Courtesy of the Z'borke archive.

of Pride demonstrations and organize and participate in various global actions related to women's rights, such as the "#MeToo" movement, or gender-related violence, such as "Reclaim the Night," as a way of empowering people to refuse imposed patriarchy and to form solidarities and alliances.

In their public support for campaigns and protests for LGBTQIA+ rights, however, they often question the commodification of Pride that makes it carnivalesque events celebrating individual freedom. Members of Le Zbor, for example, are critical of corporate sponsors and foreign NGO donors that often finance Pride demonstrations in the post-Yugoslav cities. They openly condemn the "Western" approach to women's, LGBTQIA+, and other minority rights, which often takes a colonial form in the region, something that members of other LGBTQIA+ choirs in Europe have also pointed out.⁴⁵

In so doing, one of the strategies is to revitalize the cultural memory of female partisan fighters and significant dates in Yugoslav women's past struggles. I observe choirs' performances in front of the monuments of female partisans and other female anti-fascists active before and during World War II, as well as street singing on the dates of their births or deaths and at protest marches, for example, on International Women's Day, March 8.⁴⁶ For these occasions, they usually choose songs with explicitly female themes or expressing a feminist stance, combining a repertoire of partisan, revolutionary, and workers' songs with contemporary pieces, such as "Bread and Roses." Lately known as the female activist anthem, the lyrics of this song find their beginnings in a line from a speech by suffragette Helen Todd, which was published as a poem in *The American Magazine* in December 1911. The 1912 Massachusetts textile strike, in which 25,000 workers (mostly immigrant women and children) united in protest against low wages and poor working conditions, also found resonance in the phrase. In 1974, American singer-songwriter and activist Mimi Baez Fariña, sister of the iconic folk singer Joan Baez, and her husband, Richard Farina, composed the melody as it is sung today.⁴⁷ In the last two decades, this song has been a soundtrack to many feminist protests and public events around the globe and one of the most popular pieces about women's struggles for workers' rights.

⁴⁵ Writing about this, Thomas Hilder (2020a) emphasizes that LGBTQIA+ choral networks often replicate internal EU hegemonies and paint Eastern Europe as being trans-, bi-, and homophobic while promoting discourses of European unity and solidarity.

⁴⁶ See some of the performances of Z'borke, Le Zbor, and Praksa.

⁴⁷ On the genealogy of the song and its recent collective singing, see Moore in Dillane et al. 2018; Hilder 2023.

Opting for a contemporary repertoire that emphasizes feminist struggles partly results from the relatively small number of songs about female historical figures in the choirs' local languages. To fulfill such a gap, choir members strategically adapt lyrics of the partisan songs to express a gender- and LGBTQIA+-sensitive approach. Kombinat members, for example, changed the lyrics of the partisan song "Bratje, le soncu, svobodi" (Brothers, to the sun, to freedom) into "Sestre, le soncu, svobodi" (Sisters, to the sun, to freedom), with the purpose, in Maxi's words, of paying homage to the female fighters. Z'borke, on the other side, greatly prefers adapting traditional folk or popular music songs that carry openly misogynistic messages, transforming them to produce feminist or queer readings.⁴⁸ The most usual strategy is changing the lyrics to refer to woman-to-woman and man-to-man relationships.

A conversation with Le Zbor member Svea about how they choose or adopt a song repertoire to simultaneously address the oppression of marginalized individuals and groups but without losing sight of the question of class or capitalist division of labor is illustrative: she explains to me that singing "The Internationale" in confrontation with anti-abortion initiatives tends to present the right to abortion as a class question, emphasizing the low economic and social status of women, who are not able to pay for their abortion if it is not part of public health care packages. She adds that, in their public singing interventions and media appearances, choirs address women's rights by emphasizing more general structural inequalities inscribed in reproductive labor and exploitative labor matrixes. They tend to challenge the liberal discourses of women's and LGBTQIA+ rights that often envision the fight against discrimination without acknowledging the necessity of the wider struggles for equality.

The strategy that includes a specific intersection between discourses of women's, LGBTQIA+, and other minorities' rights and the historical legacy of the PLS situates claims to equality within the discourses of class struggle and socialist revolutionary transformation. How this intersection is understood and performed varies among the choirs and is an issue of intense and vivid debate. In her recent research of Hor 29. Novembar, Jelena Gligorijević writes about the ongoing tension of integrating a feminist/queer-oriented/

⁴⁸ One of the most publicly discussed is Le Zbor's adaptation of the Croatian far-right singer Thompson's "Lijepa li si" (You are beautiful). See Le Zbor's live performance in Pula in 2013 at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N2Mc_NQ0kxA (Adria Report, dir. 2013). About Thompson's far-right profile, see Baker 2010, 95–116.

intersectional approach, and the one focused on class, resulting in the productive discussions among members about the heteronormative lyrics of the songs they choose to perform, and the gender-sensitive language. Through analysis of the gender-sensitive interventions in the repertoire, by changing either the lyrics or the way of performing, she portrays the tensions of what she sees is a dual solidarity with the oppressed: one that advocates a universalist idea of common human suffering, and the particularistic that focuses on otherness, differences, and an individual and an experience of particular social group (Gligorijević 2024).

My conversations with choir members reveal a position of simultaneous alignment with the liberal identity politics and detachment from it that is informed by the need to navigate the presumed universality of the liberal paradigm. Their discussions reflect not only the dilemma of whether political economy and class are the primary sources of inequality that masks other forms of oppression and marginalization but also the uneasiness with bringing together the historical legacies of socialism and the values of human rights. I witness how some members remain concerned about the gender-based violence and violations of LGBTQIA+ rights as normalized in state socialism. In this respect, Svea shares with me how several internal debates within Le Zbor concerned the potential reception of their singing as glorifying “the previous regime.”⁴⁹ Their anxiety makes it hard to embrace (or bring together) the discourses about the prosecution of and general marginalization of homosexuals, on the one hand, and the legacy of socialist, progressive gender and identity politics, on the other. As much as it is constitutive of self-organization, “the painful revolutionary legacy of state socialism” (Razsa 2015, 10) produces constant discomfort for choir members in searching for the right strategy to make singing activism political efficient, a topic I will often return to throughout this book.

Managing Hierarchies

Obstinately rooted in the intersection between historical legacies and contemporary demands, activist choirs are open collectives with no fixed membership, as anyone can join the choir at any time and choose her own level of involvement. The type of collaboration is flexible, meaning that members

⁴⁹ I further elaborate on the vivid debates among choir members in Chapter 6.

reappear after being absent from rehearsals for weeks or months. Others appear only at performances. Decision-making is usually by consensus, and members are encouraged to collectively decide about repertoire and performances and plan events and actions, as vividly depicted in Ljubomir's statement about the internal structure of Hor 29. Novembar: "It is a collective and a choir. It is a 'choirlective' (*horektiv*)."⁵⁰ Still, this does not imply the absence of hierarchies, as choirs are complex networks of disparate groups and individuals who cooperate with all the internal dynamics accompanying such a process.

As the vignette that opens this chapter illustrates, choirs vary in the membership and intensity of their activities. A constant flux of members significantly impacts their activities. There are periods in which they grow and those in which the number of their members, rehearsals, and performances stagnate. "There is always a danger that we will transform into a more structured organization or disappear," Milan says, alluding to the instability inherent in participatory-based organizations.⁵¹ Initially, choirs recruit new members through friendship or informal relationships.⁵² Later, the transformation from a small and relatively close group of friends to a more diverse and wider network of people poses a significant challenge that choirs deal with differently. Kombinat, for example, expands rapidly during the 2012–2013 protests in Slovenia when the choir gains higher public visibility.⁵³ From the "more organic phase," when, in Živa's words, most of the decisions were made in small-group discussions "over a beer," they have to find a way to include more than fifty members in the decision-making process. I observe the choir's increasingly busy schedule with regular rehearsals, protest singing, and numerous invitations to give concerts, resulting in almost one performance per week between December and May 2013. To avoid endless debates and make the decision-making process more efficient in this busy period, members decide to establish a program board (*programski odbor*) consisting of twelve people responsible for making decisions about all the important issues, which implies rather complex internal power dynamics, the delegation of tasks, and a hierarchical structure.

⁵⁰ Ljubomir, interview by author, January 10, 2014, Vienna.

⁵¹ Milan, interview by author, January 15, 2014, Vienna.

⁵² Kelley Tatro (2022, 119) investigates the efficacy of friendship in building solidarity among participants within and beyond Mexico City's punk scene. While friendship is not a prominent trope in activist choirs' accounts, the friendship networks that were at the core of building these collectives are used to recall the feelings of trust and intimacy that might be devalued or lost.

⁵³ Živa, interview by the author, December 27, 2013, online.

For example, several choir members admit that, despite the invitations to discuss the choir's agenda and share their preferences and visions at the rehearsals, the atmosphere is not always stimulating for making suggestions or expressing their opinions. I attend several meetings where ideas proposed by board members or those with "more authority" are more readily accepted. When I ask why other members rarely make suggestions, I am surprised to learn that they found it difficult to express an individual stance. New members, in particular, feel insecure and are more likely to avoid taking part in decision-making and taking responsibility for group activities. "In the beginning, I also had a feeling that my role was simply to 'lend' my voice and express my attitude through these songs and the collective voice," one says, adding that many newcomers see their engagement in the choir in this way. From some willing to talk more openly about these issues, I hear they did not feel encouraged to plan activities or choose the repertoire collaboratively. As a result, a few members express their opinions or decide to vote at general meetings when all members should take part in decision-making, as Mila and Sonja comment in our conversation.⁵⁴ The challenges with the collaborative principles also appeared in the smaller choirs with only ten or fifteen members, like Praksa, Le Zbor, and Z'borke. Members face difficulty sticking with the open-participatory and consensus decision-making, as this becomes meaningless. Bonded through close friendships and sometimes family ties, members feel that imposing such procedures is superfluous and might even disturb their intimate relationships.

By attending and participating in rehearsals, protests, concerts, street performances, and festivals, I notice a ubiquitous narrative among choir members about the "active" and the "passive" members—in David Graeber's words, between those prepared to "take ownership" of the collective (2009, 20) and those who prefer to be led. In our conversation, Bojana confirms this and complains that usually only a small group of two or three people invest their personal time and energy in planning and organizing activities: "When there is something concrete to do, from cleaning the rehearsal space to organizing a festival, we are always the same people. And that does not feel right . . . some pull, some drag. In a group like this, it's a bit strange, of course. I regard my membership in Kombinat as both an honor and a responsibility."⁵⁵ "Active" members often feel exhausted, particularly after

⁵⁴ Kombinat members, group interview by the author, March 3, 2013, Ljubljana.

⁵⁵ Bojana, interview by the author, June 14, 2013, Ljubljana.

being involved in demanding organizational tasks. Organizing bigger events such as tours and festivals requires weeks and sometimes even months of hard work. For this reason, it is not surprising that they complain about the delegation of tasks and ask for more active engagement of the whole collective, which sometimes results in longer-term disagreements, even to such an extent that it endangers the choirs' existence.

This is the case with Horkestar. In 2011, after the first festival of activist choirs, disagreements between the members start to arise. Accumulated frustration and tensions from the stressful period of preparing and carrying out a major event lead members who feel overwhelmed to question the choir's organizational and collaborative principles and, eventually, leave the choir. They feel hurt by the lack of commitment of their fellow members and friends with whom they have developed intimate, personal relations. In contrast to other "crises" that members usually resolve in a week or two, this time, one part of the membership and a conductor decide to leave the choir. While the choir continues its work after this divide, members need substantial time to reestablish good internal relations (Milinković et al. 2015, 20).

Talking with them and members of other choirs about such crises, in contrast to my expectations, I get the impression that they are fully aware that choirs bring together different people who do not necessarily share the same understanding of singing activism and who join an activist choir for various reasons and with various agendas and expectations. In other words, most members embrace self-organization as saturated with tension, with clashes being an inevitable part of the cooperation process. Instead of emphasizing individual differences and aspirations, they focus on sustaining the choir as a collective entity. Svea summarizes this in her statement about Le Zbor: "The choir is bigger than us because we have inherited it. We come and go, but the choir stays."⁵⁶

Prioritizing the collective, however, is nothing specific to post-Yugoslav choirs. Several scholars who study contemporary collectives based on direct democratic principles have explored this way of embracing a collective as its own entity and the way its members deal with informal hierarchies (see Graeber 2009; Razsa 2015; Tatro 2022). They notice the fine line between what activists consider constructive criticism and the deliberate harming of internal relations, which resonates with David Graeber's claim that shared responsibility and the importance of self-criticism are significant challenges

⁵⁶ Svea, interview by the author, April 3, 2019, Zagreb.

shared by many autonomous collectives that seek to maximize “individual autonomy and commitment to community at the same time” (2009, 256). Similarly, Claire Bishop claims that open participation in collaborative artistic practices is an experiment that may fail but “may nevertheless have resonance in the future, under new conditions” (2012, 7). She sees tensions, failures, and disagreements as a part of collective becoming, which activist choirs seem to exemplify. Choir members’ accounts reflect their awareness that specific problems recur over time, and they never agree on some issues.

It is June 29, 2019. I am in the workers’ museum Trudbenik,⁵⁷ where Naša pjesma and Horkestar are organizing an open rehearsal as part of “The Solidarity Festival: Defend Builders of the Society” (Festival solidarnosti: Odbranimo zidare društva), a collaboration with the self-organized collective “Roof over your head.”⁵⁸ After we sing the first block of songs,⁵⁹ I join a small crew in the museum’s backyard. I soon realize the group consists of two members from Horkestar and another two from Naša pjesma. The conversation concerns the low number of people who have come to the rehearsal; Anđela, a thirty-five-year-old art historian, and her friend from Horkestar are disappointed that only two of their fellow-choir members showed up, although all members received an invitation. They agree that this resulted from the “negative atmosphere” within Horkestar. While I initially remain silent, I cannot resist asking what caused this atmosphere. They attribute it to the recent change in membership and explain that most of the old members, tired of the constant tensions resulting from an inability to deal with individual differences, have left the choir. Anđela, visibly disappointed, says she is considering leaving the choir or joining Naša pjesma because she wants to experience something new after many years of singing in Horkestar.⁶⁰

I meet Anđela again in a small café in Belgrade a few days later. At first, she feels uncomfortable sharing more of what we discussed in Trudbenik. Yet, as the conversation becomes more spontaneous and personal, she admits that she feels nostalgic for the times when Horkestar was a space for cultivating

⁵⁷ Radnički muzej Trudbenik is located in the workers’ colony of the privatized and now-defunct company KMG Trudbenik and was created by the joint efforts of the company workers and activists. Its Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/Radnickimuzej/>) states that the museum was founded with the aim of cherishing the memory of Yugoslav workers and the Yugoslav working class and discussing their fate during the post-socialist transition.

⁵⁸ Consisting of the Initiative “Krov nad glavom” and Marks21.

⁵⁹ See videos of the performances at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iNJwAqeTTwA> (MusicAffectPolitics, dir. 2019).

⁶⁰ Anđela and a choir member, interview by the author, June 28, 2019, Belgrade.

musical equality. “I remember when we worked more collectively on music. Even the people who did not play tried to come up with an idea for a song. Everything is connected. The more democracy there was in decision-making, the more democracy there was in the music.”⁶¹ She explains that a long time ago, part of the membership proposed an initiative for choir members to start learning to play an instrument and another for the choir to have more than one conductor, but these initiatives were never implemented. Resistance to these ideas came more from conductors than from choir members, although in the past, the choir had three active conductors at once, which worked well, in Anđela’s opinion. However, she also underscores that this might be just her impression and that other members might disagree.

While her account confirms the hierarchies between members with authority who “decide” and those “who accept the situation as it is,” it also sheds light on the musical hierarchies associated with them. She clarifies what I have already observed in interactions with other choirs: that the conductor, band musicians, or musically educated members often enjoy special treatment because their engagement greatly influences the quality of the performance.⁶²

Anđela’s statement and my observation point to the challenges that manifest when horizontal organizational practices meet the demands of actual music-making. They reveal the complex performative strategies to fulfill the strivings to contest hierarchies based on musical expertise to sustain the main purpose of singing activism. This raises much broader and more delicate question: what is the relationship between musical skills or quality and collaborative organizational principles?

Although choirs do not make singing ability a prerequisite for joining, I see that in practice certain expectations are implicit. The fact that choirs sustain the position of a conductor, whom members perceive as the choir’s

⁶¹ Anđela, interview by the author, October 29, 2019, Belgrade.

⁶² Horkestar has changed several conductors, who should be mentioned: Ljiljana Santovac, Ljilja Danilović Cincarka, Zoran Petrović, Marija Balubdžić, Dragana Aleksić, Bojana Budimir, Svetlana Šmit, Marija Jocić, Jasna Kindić, Marija Mihajlović, and Marija Nikolić (current); Le zbor was also quite dynamic in that sense with Lidija Dokuzović, Glorija Linreman, Heda Gospodnetić, Dora Novinc, Dunja Bahtijarević, Tajana Josimović, Tinka Kalajzić, Eva Badanjak, Julijana Lešić, and Tena Rak (current). Hor 29. Novembar changed two conductors Saša Miletić and Jana Dolečki (current), while other choirs have the same (main) conductors since their establishment: Kombinat (Mateja Mauri and her substitute Urša Vavpotič), Praksa (Edna Strenja Jurcan), Z’borke (Pia Skušek), and Naša pjesma (Srđan Atanasovski). Instrumentalists (often also called musicians) obtain a more significant role within the choir because it is more difficult to replace them than to replace choristers. That some musicians travel to attend rehearsals or concerts, which takes time from their other music-related commitments, also makes their engagement more valuable within the collective.

leader (often also with the last word about repertoire and music-related issues), testifies to an ambivalent relationship between musical and other aspects of choirs' self-organization.⁶³ To illustrate, after the festival in Zagreb, members of Le Zbor tell one media portal, "This way of making decisions is sometimes slow and more complicated than typical hierarchical decision-making, but it is imperative for us. However, when it comes to the musical part of the choir's work, our conductor still has authority over the rest of the choir, and she has the final word on the structure of rehearsals and the way the songs are performed—although whenever she can, she patiently considers our suggestions" (Parežanin 2018).

Taking the (musical) authority of the conductor as natural or self-evident derives from the internalization of a long-standing understanding of choral singing in the Western art music canon.⁶⁴ I find it interesting that, for many choristers, practicing the principles of self-organization and horizontal collaboration does not seem to clash with implicitly valuing expertise obtained through formal music education or professional experience. I often hear from choir members that, without proper guidance, choirs could not serve their primary purpose—to sing. In this sense, most members do not see musical authority as oppressive as such but as a necessity for a collective based on musical activities. As might be expected, new members or people without singing experience particularly respect a conductor's authority.

Kombinat, the largest choir and with a more structured internal organization, provides an excellent example. Members offer a clear rationale for demanding a certain level of musical skill: the open-participatory approach in the choir's first years meant that some people struggled and were not ready to perform even after being in the choir for a year. As the number of the choir's invitations to sing publicly (including at concerts) increased, the members decided to take a more "serious approach." They put the singing quality in the foreground. After several months, they formed a committee for auditions

⁶³ At this point, the writings of Claire Bishop about "quality" and "value," as the particularly contested concepts in the participatory arts, appear helpful. She affirms that when quality is emphasized less than social purpose, we should pay attention, adopting a more nuanced critical vocabulary that underscores the conceptual and affective complexity of these projects (2012, 8).

⁶⁴ This mode of singing is still dominant in the formal music education system in Central and Southeastern Europe, especially in elementary schools. Historically, choral singing was not only an important part of the official culture but also a popular amateur activity promoted by the state institutional framework in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As in many European countries (see Bohlman 2011; Lajosi and Stynen 2015), amateur choirs in the area of former Yugoslavia contributed to strengthening national cohesion and identity throughout different historical periods (Cigoj Krstulović 2000; Šivic 2009, 16–19; Tasić 2020).

(consisting of the conductor, the second conductor, a musician from the band, and one of the choir's founders) to check whether potential members met basic musical criteria. In their words, these criteria are still far from what is expected of an experienced singer or a professional since the ability to sing was only one among several criteria for acceptance. Before asking them to sing, people answered a few questions about their motivation for becoming a member and their expectations, including how they heard about the choir, what they see as the purpose of singing activism, and so forth.

Such an approach still leaves time for people to evolve musically and allows them to be involved in other roles beyond singing. New and musically less-experienced members still not "ready" for concert performances can participate in protests and street singing or help in organizational tasks such as fundraising and maintaining the website and Facebook page. When they acquire confidence in singing, they can join concert performances. For trained or talented members, such a preparation period is unnecessary, and they get an opportunity to fully participate in the choir's activities earlier.

This unequal treatment of trained or untrained (or experienced or inexperienced) members evokes Rancière's thesis about the authority of knowledge as the subtlest form of inequality from his famous book *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons on Intellectual Emancipation* (1991). He writes about the need to reject structural inequities based on the superiority of the expertise of the "teacher" or "explicator," recognizing instead that "ignorant" people are equally "qualified" to produce and transmit knowledge. This thesis embodies the emancipatory idea of radical equality, which begins when everyone can learn and teach everything regardless of status, position, or level of education. For Rancière (1991), the dissolution of the direct connection between knowledge and authority is a pivotal political issue.

Choir members are aware of this knowledge–power axis and try to deal with the hierarchies based on musical education or skills. One strategy is downplaying the role of the conductor as an "educator" or "leader" and instead emphasizing that of a facilitator. During stage performances, conductors avoid taking a position in front of the choir with their backs turned to the audience but stand together with other singers. Most choirs also adopt the practice that individual members announce and comment on a song before the performance, usually by standing in front of the choir. This practice encourages choir members to take more prominent roles in the performance beyond only singing.

Other tactics are related more to the internal delegation of tasks: members, regardless of their experience, knowledge, or skills, can actively participate in arranging songs, writing lyrics, or leading rehearsals. The latter is mainly a backup tactic if the conductor is absent or cannot perform her role. It also gives the conductor a necessary break from constantly being in charge of rehearsals and performances. Sometimes, the conductor's role is assigned to another member or members entirely. For example, before she left Horkestar, its first conductor gave lessons to three other members so they could take over the rehearsals and lead the choir, which, as Anđela recollects, went well. In her opinion, this contributed to an environment in which members felt freer to experiment with new things and approaches, which encouraged them to take a more active role in the choir's activities in general. She emphasizes that attempts to write songs collectively, either by organizing songwriting workshops or in a more spontaneous way by composing during rehearsals, were particularly fruitful.

When Anđela complains to me about the more recent negative atmosphere in the choir, it is clear she longs for such an approach to self-organization. She feels uncomfortable with the "musical shift" the members of Horkestar have taken since the split from Horkeškart in 2015 when the choir started singing more demanding pieces, fostering collaboration with Belgrade's alternative rock 'n' roll scene and taking part in commercial festivals (such as the Exit Festival).⁶⁵ Her account reflects the divide this matter spurred among the membership. As the catalog accompanying the exhibition during Horkestar's fifteenth-anniversary celebration in 2015 describes: "Some pursued these new goals, whereas others wanted to keep the old spirit of Horkeškart, and they wanted the choir to be a more socially engaged collective and less a rock 'n' roll band" (Milinković et al. 2015, 5).

However, not all my conversations with the members reveal a similar longing. On the contrary, their opinions about emphasizing musical aspects of choirs' activities differ significantly. I am present at meetings and rehearsals where members, after gaining some musical skills to elevate their performance to the next level, insist on the quality of performance. Balancing the activist approach and good-quality singing remains a burning issue among members, particularly when only a few people are willing to engage in activities outside concerts. In our conversation, Mila and Sonja express resentment that after Kombinat gained more public attention in

⁶⁵ One of the biggest popular music festivals in Southeastern Europe is held in Novi Sad, Serbia.

2012–2013 and started giving concert performances more often, the interest in street singing interventions and open rehearsals decreased. They say that in contrast to concerts, they gather twenty people at most for street singing. “Some of them are happiest when they sing in *Cankarju* [Cankarjev dom, the main hall in Ljubljana] when the national TV records it. This is a small group, but they exist.”⁶⁶ I often hear other members criticizing the ones who take singing activism as a purely aesthetic practice as they are members of the “classical choir.” “They regard it as important to sing as correctly as possible, to show up, and then to go home.”⁶⁷

Still, I cannot neglect the awareness of ambiguities and inconsistencies in members’ accounts. Although critical of the “lack of activist engagement,” Bojana admits that just showing up at every rehearsal or performance is an activist act and should be appreciated.⁶⁸ Moreover, street singing requires spontaneity and improvisation, which means that people have to react on short notice, and many cannot take part in such actions because they have jobs and families. According to Lejla, attendance in Hor 29. Novembar depends on the type of interventions planned. Sometimes, there is no time for the usual discussion and consensus decision-making about whether the event or cause is appropriate.⁶⁹ “If we want to act spontaneously, we have to sacrifice something,” Lejla concludes in her account.⁷⁰ In the next section, I will explore to what extent singing activism’s spontaneous and unstable nature enables wider communal engagement.

Rehearsal: Collective Creativity and Productive Instability

Two months after our meeting in Trudbenik, I meet Anđela on October 20 at the celebration of the liberation of Belgrade in World War II organized by Naša pjesma. The name of the event is “I don’t want a concert—I want a revolution” (*Neću koncert—hoću revoluciju*).⁷¹ She tells me that, to expand her

⁶⁶ Kombinat members, group interview by the author, March 3, 2013, Ljubljana.

⁶⁷ Bojana, interview by the author, June 14, 2013, Ljubljana.

⁶⁸ Bojana, interview by the author, June 14, 2013, Ljubljana.

⁶⁹ Lejla’s impression was that all events related to protecting refugees or standing up for rights are usually accepted without a prior agreement since they are considered unquestionable.

⁷⁰ Lejla, interview by the author, January 16, 2014, Vienna.

⁷¹ For more about the role activist choirs take in alternative commemoration practice in the post-Yugoslav context, see Chapter 4.

activist singing experience, she eventually decided to sing with Naša pjesma occasionally while still being a regular member of Horkestar. I sit at the back, high up on the bleachers in the Center for Cultural Decontamination, with a Zoom recorder in hand, prepared to record the event. While I have participated in many of Naša pjesma's street performances and open rehearsals as a singer, this is the first concert of theirs I am attending as an audience member (see Figure 2.5). Although I do not expect to see a structured and polished performance—mainly because I was there when the choir members decided on the repertoire just a few minutes before the event started—I am still surprised that everything is happening on the spot, without any preparation.



Figure 2.5 Naša pjesma performing at the alternative commemoration of the liberation of Belgrade in World War II, 2018. Courtesy of the author Theodore Teichman.

Srđan, the conductor, opens the event by saying that the choir cherishes the songs related to Yugoslav socialism and the principles of amateurism and their role in intervening in the sociopolitical reality.⁷² He states that this approach envisions radically expanding the choir to encompass all people present, an “abolition of the audience.” In practice, this means that choir

⁷² The choir's Facebook posts and songbooks contain similar statements: <https://www.facebook.com/hornasapjesma>.

members start inviting people from the audience to join them on stage after his opening remarks. This is the usual practice when Naša pjesma's members do street singing interventions, especially when the number of singers is low, and they want to gather more voices to enrich the loudness.

In general, choirs actively work toward fostering listeners' engagement in singing. One of the strategies is the so-called public or open rehearsals (*javna, otvorena proba, odprta vaja*) that subvert the defining aspects of the Western tradition of classical choral singing: the division between the listeners and performers and between preparation and performance. Choirs usually organize them in the form of street singing or singing sessions in their rehearsal space. Open rehearsals give people an opportunity to join in singing, participate in discussions about the repertoire, and write commentaries about the songs without any obligation to become choir members. Members of Naša pjesma organize regular open rehearsals every month or two on significant dates in Yugoslav and global socialist and anti-fascist history, including those related to revolutionary and anti-colonial struggles. For example, they organized a rehearsal to commemorate the hundredth anniversary of the founding of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia and the deaths of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht or a rehearsal dedicated to the Paris Commune. The song chosen for that occasion was "Le drapeau rouge" (1877), translated into Serbian as "Crveni steg komunara." To commemorate the textile workers' strike in Lawrence, Massachusetts, which began on January 11, 1912, and lasted for more than two months, participants at an open rehearsal learn the abovementioned "Bread and Roses." If not related to the particular historical date, Naša pjesma holds open rehearsals in public spaces with particular symbolic meanings or sites of current sociopolitical struggles.

On the aesthetic side, an open rehearsal suggests a spontaneous singing that subverts the norm of a finished, polished performance. Speaking about the short-term activist choir named Proba, active between 2010 and 2014, its founders Prota and Žole from Škart collective say: "We never prepare for performance. It is unpredictable." Further explaining their approach to singing activism, Prota says that the songs they perform are composed for *nesluhiste* [the word usually used for people who cannot vocally reproduce what they hear], requiring "no piano, no tools, no performances. Improvisation means that we are always ready to perform."⁷³

⁷³ Prota and Žole, public talk, January 29, 2015, Belgrade.

This usage of the concept of rehearsal echoes scholarly accounts suggesting that spontaneous or improvisational performance is “often seen as a response and a corrective to the normative ontology of Western art music” (Born, Lewis, and Straw 2017, 9). However, the way choir members employ it additionally emphasizes the rejection of professionalization and expertise as the preconditions of artistic expression. The political capacity of spontaneous, in situ singing lies in questioning the boundaries of the established artistic expression to reclaim amateurism as central to emancipatory musical activities.⁷⁴

Activist choirs’ focus on spontaneity and improvisation does not only derive from the open-participatory approach and the idea that “everyone can sing.” It draws on the Yugoslav revolutionary experience, in which spontaneity and improvisation were vital in class-conscious cultural expressions. Improvisation and an ad hoc approach emerged as a demand of the particular moment of PLS. As the Yugoslav composer and partisan fighter Miroslav Špiler writes in his memoirs (Tomašek 1982, 331), the so-called people’s choirs (*narodni zbori*) comprised partisan fighters and people from the “liberated territories” as “spontaneous” or “unorganized” collectives. Due to the constant movement of the fighting units, choirs held rehearsals in abandoned houses, in the woods, or in open fields, just as the scene in Figure 2.6 documents, regardless of snow or rain, and often during the night because these locations could be bombed in the daytime (Hercigonja in Tomašek 1982, 166). Amateur choirs’ singing was always hampered by a lack of musical literature and scores, instruments, and singers and instrumentalists (Cvetko 1981, 5), some of whom were killed just before rehearsals or performances (Špiler in Tomašek 1982, 320). Such conditions forced people involved in choral activities to improvise in form and content while building musical activities centered on amateurism.

Historical accounts also testify that the initial spontaneity and unpredictability of musical activities in the first World War II years also persisted after 1943, when the PLS became more solidly organized, with groups and committees responsible for procuring resources and organizing cultural activities. In her testimony, the female partisan fighter Stanka Vrinjanin recalls a story about how, even when “organized,” singing largely remained

⁷⁴ Claire Bishop, exploring participatory art in her book *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, uses the concept of improvisation to mark an artistic interest in participation and collaboration that has grown since the early 1990s, a hallmark of artistic orientation toward soci-ality (2012, 1).



Figure 2.6 Rehearsal of the Choir of Wounded Partisans (*Invalidski pevski zbor*), conductor Karel Pahor, Sele pri Otovcu, August 1944. Author Božidar Jakac, courtesy of the holder of the material rights Primož Pablo Miklavc Turnher and the National Museum of Contemporary History of Slovenia.

a spontaneous activity. An educated musician with a degree in piano and conducting from the Music Academy in Zagreb, she was assigned the task of organizing a choir in the liberated territory. She invested a considerable effort in guiding their singing, as they continuously sang spontaneously and did not want to be guided by a conductor (in Tomašek 1982, 347).

In that sense, the strategic amateurism of activist choirs does not recall improvisation as simply an artistic form but as a social practice and existential activity deriving from the material conditions of the revolutionary moment, as the title of the *Naša pjesma*'s event illustrates. This approach echoes Rancière's idea of the radical equality of aesthetic experience, which implies not only dissolving the authority of the teacher or artist or simply involving the audience in the artistic practice but also radically reconfiguring the conditions that allow inequalities between performers and audience (1991, 72–73). He is critical of avant-garde art because, despite experimenting with new power relations between artists and audiences, it still perpetuates the same structural relations in the artistic field (Citton 2010, 37). Exploring activist choirs with that in mind, I see their attempts to cultivate a spontaneous

or improvised performance as closer to an everyday existential practice that intervenes in the very division between art and non-art. I occasionally encounter an explicit reflection on this in the choir members' accounts: Jana, a conductor of Hor 29. Novembar, tells me laughingly how she often motivates singers at rehearsals by reminding them that partisan fighters sang in life-threatening situations, not out of joy, but as a means of survival. "When they complained about repeating the song once again, I said, 'What do you think? The partisans were eager to sing? No. You have no rifle, no *opanke*.'⁷⁵ You're dressed and warm. . . . Sing again and stop complaining!" Her statement refers to the extreme material conditions of the PLS in which amateur singing in partisan units occurred.⁷⁶

The contemporary context, however, inevitably adds a new layer to ad hoc performances, improvisation, and situatedness in the revolutionary moment. While recording the concert of Naša pjesma, I am overwhelmed by what I, as a musically educated listener, experience as an "uncontrolled" situation on stage. Some people are singing loudly, out of tune, and at different tempos than others. Occasionally, singers mess up the lyrics, starting with the wrong verse, while some look utterly lost, seemingly chasing the melody. I feel uneasy and, at some moments, even embarrassed.

Talking to the singers and the audience members after the performance that evening, I discover that many of them felt similarly. Although most support Naša pjesma's approach, they feel the same uneasiness that the whole performance was left to chance, shaped by the situation. People who joined in the singing acknowledge that they felt uncomfortable because they did not know how to behave on stage and learned to sing the songs on the spot. Anđela, who sang in Naša pjesma and Horkestar that evening, says that trying to catch up with the lyrics and melody was stressful for her. However, she underscores that this unpredictability also produced a new kind of excitement.⁷⁷ For listeners only (those who did not join the singing), there was a lack of the structure in the performance since the event announced as the commemoration of Liberation Day. Some of them are disturbed by the discrepancy between giving homage to historical struggles by singing the repertoire of partisan, workers', and revolutionary songs, on the one hand, and the performance based on total improvisation, on the other. From their

⁷⁵ Traditional footwear in the Balkans.

⁷⁶ Jana, interview by the author, February 14, 2014, Vienna.

⁷⁷ Anđela, interview by the author, October 29, 2019, Belgrade.

impressions I sensed that this discrepancy brings a risk of reading such performances in an ironic fashion that decreases the value of the already publicly devaluated legacies of Yugoslav partisan struggle.

It seemed that *Naša pjesma's* alternative commemoration did not fully succeed in strategically politicizing the spontaneity and improvisation. The main goal of politically recuperating the legacies of the PLS, the anti-fascist struggle, and the socialist revolution was somehow overshadowed by concerns about the very realization of singing as a performative act. In a completely different context from the revolutionary one, recalling situatedness and spontaneity ended up being “a performance only,” making people uncomfortable and thus less willing to join in the singing. The uneasiness people experienced that evening points to the gaps in expectations associated with spontaneity or improvisation as an efficient collective-building activity. Why? This question sheds further light on activists’ striving toward a collective voice of “all the people,” both in its contested aural features and in its political consequences. I will take up this question in the following chapter.

3

Sounding “All in One Voice”

“We are shouting—it is the opposite of singing. The thing is that Horkestar has always welcomed people who ‘do not have the ability to vocally reproduce what they hear’ (*nesluhisti*). No auditions: everyone is welcome,” says Ružica, a member and the temporary conductor of the Horkestar.¹ “The good news is that at the moment, there is no one in the choir who cannot sing, but this is just a coincidence. It is always changing.” Milan, a member of Hor 29. Novembar, was more explicit, attaching to their raw, loud, and at times “uncontrolled” choral sound a social and political connotation: “The choir allows us to collectively ‘shout’ social problems, to ‘scream’ social anger, and ‘howl’ discontent.”²

These statements take on greater meaning after a Naša pjesma performance I participate in at an exhibition in Belgrade’s Culture Center in June 2016. As usual, we sing a cappella. Our voices, in different registers and keys, mix into a loud sound that fills the basement space. The atmosphere begins to heat up as we sing at the edge of shouting about the partisan struggle, tired and exploited workers, and their strikes. The audience, thrilled by the performance, occasionally clapping and singing along, rewards us with enthusiastic applause after every song. At the end of the concert, an audience member is surprised to see her friend singing in the choir. She comes to him and asks which voice part he sang, referring to the normative choral structure of SATB (soprano, alto, tenor, bass). He answers: “We do not have this bourgeois division between the voices. We all sing in one voice.”

* * *

In this chapter, I consider choirs’ strivings to destabilize a division between “naturally” talented and untalented singers and trained and untrained voices. My exploration provides an insight into the aural, social, and affective

¹ Ružica, interview by the author, August 18, 2017, Belgrade.

² Milan, interview by the author, January 15, 2014, Vienna.

features of choirs' vocal delivery, encapsulated in the phrase "all in one voice." Used as the title of the activist choir festival, its symbolic meaning and aural characteristics recall the historical subjectivity of people who managed to stand together for the revolutionary struggles. My analysis thus concentrates on a collective action based on a mass voice, a question that has a specific connotation and consequences in the post-Yugoslav context. I offer ethnographic insight into choir members' aspiration to resound class-based solidarities as a way to contest ethnic divisions in the region and the more general processes of neoliberal social and political fragmentation.

Voicing Equality

Activist choirs include both "musically skilled" or "talented" singers and those who are unable to carry a tune, struggle to match pitch, or do not have a "natural" ability to vocally reproduce what they hear. Therefore, "all in one voice" summarizes the dynamic social process, vocal interaction, and sonic materiality that activist choirs want to bring to life. The phrase signals a process of vocally coming together and a sound of different but equal voices.

A trained ear might question the quality of the activist choirs' vocal expression. The raw and unpolished act of sounding challenges the performance standards associated with Western art choral singing. Members of Hor 29. Novembar summarize this "divergence" from the accepted norm in the expression "not singing in tune."³ Even the choirs that cherish a more polished sound and often sing in two-part harmony, like the all-female choirs Praksa, Z'borke, and Kombinat, differ from "professional vocal style" in their unpolished timbre and lack of standard vocal techniques. In others, such as Naša pjesma or Hor 29. Novembar, choristers struggle to carry the tune and keep the pitch, particularly in the higher ranges. A membership consisting of different voices identified as male, female, older, and younger makes the collective vocal expression more demanding, visible in the late entries, unstable solos, unsynchronized endings, and other "mistakes."

Therefore, in practice, "all in one voice" is a complex social and vocal process, deriving from the self-organized nature of choirs and contingent on each singer's voice; her listening histories, attitudes, and preferences; and the contexts of performance and type of repertoire. It demands the constant

³ For more about how choir members describe their choral sound, see Reitsamer 2016.

negotiation of hierarchies based on musical skills or education. “No one expects our choir to be musically perfect—any level of quality is okay,” Jana says in one of our long talks about singing activism as positioned between musical and nonmusical demands. “Yet we are not a talking or screaming group, and creating a ‘common sound’ is still important,” she added right away, revealing the complexity of a collective that excludes neither “untalented” singers nor educated or skillful ones.⁴ Srđan adds another perspective, defining “all in one voice” as keeping various voices together to not fall apart—in his words, “something that prevents the choir’s sound from turning into a cacophony.”⁵ Both acknowledge achieving a “feeling” of being synchronized in the common rhythm, flow, or energy, which Jana describes: “It is not just the collective producing of a tone, it should be a shared feeling—that we are together in this as one.”⁶

“All in one voice” is thus more a social than an auditory category, something that Steven Connor defines as an act of collective voicing or joint vocalization, for which he coins the term “chorality” (2016). Examples of chorality, he writes, are not limited to choral singing but include any other collective utterance of crowds, such as chants of protest, prayers, or children’s games. He further claims that the meaning and function of musical chorality are related to the fact that its practitioners are much more likely to be amateurs than professional musicians (2016, 16). However, the division he draws between involuntary and voluntary collective voicing does not seem to fully apply to activist choirs, as their collective vocal expression is simultaneously both spontaneous and intended. Its creation results from strategic amateurism, a process of becoming a self-organized music collective.

In my interactions with them, I observe how sounding “all in one voice” demands profound renegotiating of choir members’ vocal capacities and rearticulating the values and meanings attached to them. Less-experienced members and those who believe they cannot “carry a tune” admit that singing activism helps them remove the stigma of not having musical skill or competence as an assumed requirement for singing or leading a choir. Many also report that before joining the activist choir, they believed they

⁴ Jana, interview by the author, February 15, 2018, online.

⁵ The main problem for him as a conductor is to find the right key in which all members can sing, as their voices are naturally suited to some keys better than others (Srđan, interview by the author, June 6, 2018, Belgrade). The extent to which sounding “all in one voice” more or less fits male/female or other types of voices goes beyond my interest here, but it is certainly worthy of further examination.

⁶ Srđan, interview by the author, June 6, 2018, Belgrade.

could not sing at all due to their presumed lack of natural abilities. For instance, Branko, a member of Horkestar, tells me that a music teacher in his primary school advised him to avoid singing and to find another “hobby” despite his powerful desire to become a choir member. From this and similar stories about rejections by conventional choirs, often during childhood, I learn that joining an activist choir is an act of defiance. “All in one voice” allows members to subvert the standards and methods of institutional music education, in which the ability to vocally reproduce what one hears is a prerequisite for access to musical activities. The pressure from the singing talent, experience, or training as the precondition for joining a choir still haunts members long after they join activist choirs. For instance, Tanja says it took her five years before she got enough self-esteem to sing the leading voice, a solo, or suggest an arrangement. The lack of expectations helped her confidence grow. In her opinion, meeting the norm of beautiful or correct singing blocks initiative and active participation in choir activities and kills joyfulness and playfulness, which deeply shape singing activism.

To my surprise, the musically educated members and those with more choral singing experience share the same stance. In 2013, when Jana replaced Saša, the previous conductor of choir Hor 29. Novembar, Saša was concerned that she might be shocked by the quality of their singing because of her music education and experience as a member of the famous Zagreb children’s choir *Zvezdice* (Stars),⁷ and as a lead singer in a jazz band. However, she finds leading an activist choir to be an exciting, refreshing, and inspiring task. Several months after she joined the choir, Jana even comments in an interview that she would never have imagined that she would become so addicted to both the choir’s “self-organized structure and its way of singing” (Dolečki 2013).

Jana’s experience is similar to those of other musically trained members with extensive singing experience for whom activist choirs offered an escape from professional or academic choirs’ conservative work methods. I often hear that strategic amateurism is an antidote to the unquestioned authority of the conductor and the hierarchical power relations in semiprofessional and professional choirs. Members criticize demanding rehearsals that follow defined “rules” and discipline the body, aiming only to achieve the

⁷ This children’s choir has gone on many international tours, performing in prestigious concert halls and venues, such as New York’s Lincoln Center and the Milan Cathedral, and made hundreds of recordings in collaboration with famous conductors and composers. For more about the choir, see website “Zvezdice Djevojački Zbor” (n.d.).

best possible “quality” of performance.⁸ Activist choirs offer them a specific refuge in terms of not just the focus on the outcome but also of the method—of “proper” rehearsal, warming up, posture, and breathing demanded in professional and semiprofessional choirs.

These accounts, however, are not unique to the post-Yugoslav context, as members of many amateur, voluntary, and participatory choirs around the globe share the same experience. For example, the “democratization of voice” is one of the central topics in Caroline Bithell’s research on the Natural Voice Movement in the UK (2014). She explores how people who do not consider themselves skilled or trained singers perceive amateur singing as offering “a promise of vocal liberation” (2014, 68). The so-called global or world music repertoire associated with the “natural voice” unfolds a politics of participation that, in Bithell’s view, is not related to a particular sound quality, type of voice, or vocal production but is rather a category that stands in opposition to the regimes of the Western art music concept of voice and musicality (2014, 65–66). Several other authors also explore amateur vocal singing as essential for promoting and practicing fundamental democratic principles (see Bell 2008, 239), celebrating cultural pluralism and the politics of difference, as I note in Chapter 2.

Several scholars call, however, for a more critical analysis of the hierarchies established through the amateur–professional nexus. They show that while taking participatory singing activities that nurture “world music” as an opposition to the Western-centered framework of choral practice, we have to be aware of the prominence of the Western gaze that does not destabilize but naturalizes differences. In her critical observation of the Natural Voice Movement, Caitlin Marshall asserts that particularly in the context of societies in the West or Global North, amateur choral singing of repertoire from the “Global South” (usually labeled “world music” or “world song”) is intertwined with discourses of racialization (2016, 191). Cultivating an untrained voice associated with marginalized identities and regions by people in the Global North invites specific values, affects, and behaviors that, she argues, might foster the naturalization of difference and reappropriation of racialized subjectivity.⁹

⁸ Disciplining the body to produce a better voice is a common practice in choral pedagogy, particularly in professional choirs where the body is understood as the main instrument (see Rardin 2017; for more about choral pedagogy, see Abrahams and Head 2017).

⁹ For an exploration of racial discourse in relationship to untrained musical performance and noninstitutionalized forms of training, see Siv Lie’s work on Romani Manouche musicians in France. The racialized approach to music pedagogy, she shows, serves as an important resource for

These critical views raise the question of whether we can take the subversive potential of amateur music- and sound-related activities for granted while neglecting the power hierarchies shaped by the macro geopolitical and economic power structures. Pushing further in this direction, my examination of post-Yugoslav singing activism calls for reconsidering the predominant liberal discourse of diversity, inclusion, and social justice. Singing activism empowers “untalented singers” or those marginalized by the exclusionary, hierarchical power relations typical of a Western understanding of musicality and choral singing. Moreover, such performative engagement aims to contest the bourgeois model of culture based on expertise or professionalism, to which selected social strata have privileged access. I intend to show how, instead of solely empowering excluded, marginalized, and oppressed individuals and communities through amateur music activities, sounding “all in one voice” exposes the class solidarities diminished in capitalist modes of production and social relations.

In the opening vignette, I show how choir members frame their vocal expression as antithetic to the choral practice associated with the bourgeois art canon. For them, sounding “all in one voice” carries a class connotation and recalls the collective struggles for revolutionary transformation. To understand this, we must remind ourselves of the aural histories of the Yugoslav socialist revolution. In historical accounts, music activities in the PLS were described as the continuation of the previous international revolutionary strivings and their songs: “In new stages—the Russian Revolution of 1905, the Great October, the Hungarian Commune, the Spanish Revolution—this battle song [*borbene pjesme*, prim. auth.] follows the struggle of the working people as its musical soundtrack, as a spontaneous, intimate and immediate musical-poetic realization of the most intimate feeling of a human individual, who is an integral and indivisible part of the mass, the people’s collective, and its struggle” (Hercigonja and Danon 1962, xxi). As this quote suggests, singing during the PLS channeled the voice of the revolutionary masses, which is why partisan songs were also called “mass songs,” along with “fight songs.” Musicologist and Naša pjesma’s choir leader Srđan Atanasovski notes that, while the term “mass song” (*masovna pesma* in Serbo-Croatian, *mnóžična pesem* in Slovenian, *массовая песня* in Russian, and *Massenlied* in German) might refer to any song that gains mass popularity and is performed

Manouche musicians to renegotiate their positions as racialized subjects and to advance their social visibility and improve their material conditions of life (2020, 385).

by masses, its notion links historically to the idea of the proletarian revolution.¹⁰ Exploring the genealogy and musical structure of the repertoire performed during the PLS, he writes that their simple arrangements and melodic and rhythmic lines served for easy memorization, fostering the participation of all people in singing regardless of their ability or talent (2017, 32). For this reason, he concludes, amateurism was a ubiquitous and constitutive component of mass songs. However, he differentiates between the revolutionary time during World War II and the later, post–World War II usage of “mass songs” in the official socialist culture politics, something I will discuss in the next chapter.

There is also another term used for the songs performed during the PLS: “our songs” or “our song” (*naše pesme, naša pjesma, naša pesem*), which corresponds even more to choirs’ sounding “all in one voice.” Commonly used as the title of collections of partisan poetry or songbooks, the term suggests not only that songs are sung collectively by “all the people” but also their collective, anonymous authorship. Often created in the interaction among fighters from different social, economic, and educational backgrounds (including prominent composers), the songs were a product of collective endeavor.¹¹ The editorship of songbooks printed during World War II was also usually collective or anonymous. This practice resulted from the constantly changing and precarious material conditions of their production. In the occupying territories, the very possibility to sing, write, collect songs, or print songbooks was a revolutionary act in itself, as preparing, printing, and distributing songbooks was often illegal and punishable by death. Production and dissemination were also difficult in partisan fighting units because of the lack of technical and human resources. Often, one person started to work on a songbook, and others continued, in many cases because of the capture, wounding, or death of the previous editor or because of damage to the improvised hectograph machine (called *šapirograf*) or other equipment needed for printing (Tomašek 1982, 339). Such conditions also severely constrained the writing down of the songs, which is why listening and oral transmission were the main methods for collecting them. Losing the paper, notes, or an instrument had the same weight as losing a gun, as

¹⁰ He emphasizes the songs’ pre–World War II genealogy and international character, writing that in the nineteenth century, the mass character of these songs indicated the internationalism of the proletariat in opposition to national projects; see Atanasovski 2017, 32.

¹¹ During World War II, the songbooks were an important tool for transmitting the partisan song repertoire across different geographical areas of Yugoslavia with the purpose of maintaining the anti-fascist spirit and nurturing the struggle.

the female partisan fighter and conductor Flora Tolentino-Devčić reported in her memoirs (in Tomašek 1982, 339). Making songbooks was a heroic act that testifies to the importance of building a new model of collective, self-organized, emancipatory amateur cultural and artistic expression defined by Yugoslav scholars as “creating by the people for the people” (*ustvarjati iz ljudstva za ljudstvo*) (Cvetko 1981, 12). This model indicates a radical break with capitalist society based on class inequality and exploitation¹² to build the collective political subjectivity of the masses and their strivings toward a new socialist society. Elaborating on this, Gal Kirn asserts that cultural production during the PLS, which he defines as “the partisan counter-archive,” was centered on the concept of the community to come (2016; 2020).

In examining performative strategies that reclaim the voice of revolutionary masses for contemporary political uses, the question arises: what are the sonic applications, possibilities, and consequences of a class-based notion of sounding “all in one voice”?

Listening in Solidarity

One year after becoming the conductor of Hor 29. Novembar, Jana admits that leading an activist singing collective “is both a blessing and a curse” (Rosandić 2014). Her statement moderates the romantic overtones of “all in one voice” as a vocal expression of equality. When I ask her to elaborate, she explains that it would be much easier to lead twenty people with perfect pitch who know how to read sheet music, as this would mean just working on sound quality and polished performance. She explains that conducting an activist choir “simply by bringing these voices together as they are”—without smoothing them over or “correcting” all the variations in the pitch, attack, and pace of singing—is quite a demanding process. She shares with me that she has had to invest considerable effort to distance herself from her “trained ear” developed through formal education and twelve years of singing in a professional choir. Her first task was to face the deeply internalized power relations based on expertise. She learned not to react to “mistakes”—to suppress an involuntary reaction by saying something or making a face when the singers miscarried the tune or were off-pitch: “It sometimes happens that

¹² For more about the transition from individual to collective authorship as one of the most important characteristics of the self-emancipatory process of the working masses in the Yugoslav revolution, see Nedeljković 1962a; 1962b; 1963; Hofman 2008. On anonymous authorship, see Kirn 2020.

I hear a voice that is totally ‘out of key,’ and I react instinctively as a trained musician. The next moment, I am already fighting against that reaction: no, this is actually what we want—we have two voices singing at their own pitch, and we still feel good. The world did not collapse; everything is still okay, and we are all enjoying ourselves.”¹³

I fully shared her discomfort, myself often experiencing the same difficulty in disregarding my previous experience as a trained musician and educated listener, as visible in my reaction to Naša pjesma’s concert I described in the previous chapter. “Normalizing” mistakes as constitutive of sounding “all in one voice” is not Jana’s task alone. She describes situations when it takes the form of a funny game, as people start laughing when they notice that she has reacted to the wrong pitch. But sometimes, she says, there are also moments when they start singing loudly on purpose to drown out the wrong pitch and help a person carry the tune or return to the right key.

Therefore, although sounding “all in one voice” evokes the spontaneous singing of the revolutionary masses, it is not an entirely self-regulated process. Choirs need to achieve a minimum sound quality, which, in members’ words, is “far from professional.” At first, members must learn how to listen to each other metaphorically and musically.¹⁴ Jana, however, discloses that listening is more than simply learning to adjust to different voices’ common pitch and timbre by subordinating your voice to the collective sound. It is a way of expressing respect for others and overcoming egoism, and a focus on personal goals, ideas, and desires by becoming attuned to the breath, body, and energy of others—or, as she frames it, to be “listening in solidarity” (*solidarni u slušanju*). This phrase emphasizes the complex process of listening at the intersection between an individual and a collective.

We cannot disregard that careful listening is one of the main prerequisites of any collective music-making, including that of professional musicians, orchestras, and choirs, regardless of their type, repertoire, or performance context.¹⁵ Because they strive for equality, however, activist choirs adjust to the weakest or slowest members, particularly newcomers and others who do

¹³ Jana, interview by the author, February 15, 2018, online.

¹⁴ As I mentioned in this chapter’s opening vignette, an individual’s ability to listen takes precedence over the quality of their vocal expression.

¹⁵ Recent research in music and sound studies on listening as a historically situated and mediated activity explores the practice of listening as a technologically mediated experience (Sterne 2003; Erlmann 2004; Hirschkind 2006) or as something inscribed in the sonic environment (see, e.g., LaBelle 2010; Bijsterveld and Pinch 2011; Daughtry 2015). A focus on listening in the context of singing, however, is rather rare, except for Nina Sun Eidsheim’s focus on singers listening to themselves and on the self-perception of the voice as an important part of the vocal process (2019, 9).

not feel confident in carrying the tune. Recognizing this as an example of egalitarianism, solidarity, and sharing, Jana asserted: “The caravan goes at the pace of the slowest camel. We cannot continue and forget or leave behind the caravan’s straggler. Rather, we all have to adjust to him or her.” Her statement evokes the metaphor of strategic amateurism as “a struggle against selfishness” and “the politics of the self as the politics of the other” that, in accordance with Rancière, is essential to emancipation (1992, 59).

In practice, however, adjusting to the slowest members does not prove to be the most egalitarian or the best for the collective. People with more skill sometimes leave choirs when they become bored with the slow pace of learning new repertoire and its simplicity or redundancy. Kristina from Horkestar admits: “We have to be honest: it is not that we pretend to practice egalitarianism, but in reality, it is easier for some of us to adjust to the collective than others.”¹⁶ I often hear that to make this adjustment more smoothly and pleasant, members with more experience offer help to new members learn the songs after a rehearsal. Jana tells me she once witnessed a new member asking a more skillful singer if she would give him private singing lessons. Instead of offering him help, the singer suggested that the newcomer regularly attend rehearsals and listen carefully to the others. Though initially surprised, Jana later realized that this situation actually strengthens horizontal relations based on exchange and mutual learning.¹⁷

A desire to improve their singing skills is not alien to members; they do not see it as divergent from strategic amateurism. This proves that negotiating the norms of expertise is a complex process connected to the presumed inferiority of an amateur as being unable to reach the professional(ized) standard, as Robert A. Stebbins wrote back in 1977 (600). Yet, instead of sustaining an unconscious internalizing of the power mechanisms based on expertise, choir members tend to constantly expose and debate them. The desire to sing better is something they tend to separate from striving toward professional(ized) choral performance. In terms of sharing knowledge among members, strategic amateurism cultivates the position of the auto-didact that develops skills not by following formal education and training standards but through informal collective practices.

As one of these practices, listening in solidarity helps members to improve their rehearsal and performance skills. Members generally believe that

¹⁶ Kristina, interview by the author, August 18, 2017, Belgrade.

¹⁷ Jana, interview by the author, February 15, 2018, online.

expressing themselves vocally is easier when the group is bigger. Having more voices makes supporting various dynamic levels, timbres, and pitches easier and provides a background into which individual voices can more easily melt. This feeling contradicts the usual view that people feel more secure and are prepared to express themselves freely in smaller and more intimate collectives. In line with this, choirs consisting of six to ten members, such as Le Zbor and Praksa, dedicate more time to improving their singing skills since if one person is missing or miscarries the tune, this greatly influences the collective sound. Edna, a conductor of Praksa, provides more insight on this point, saying that this creates an atmosphere in which members strive to meet expectations and fear that they will spoil the sound if their singing skills are not at the top level. Such a presumption is an obstacle to acquiring new members, who may assume that singing talent is a precondition for joining the choir, which Edna also confirms in our conversation. She notices that people are hesitant to express an interest in singing in Praksa, as they fear an assessment of their vocal quality.¹⁸

The appropriate song repertoire also helps in sounding “all in one voice.” Jana notes that the right choice of repertoire, appropriate for different singing skill levels, is a precondition for coming to a common sound. With simple songs in a narrow range and repetitive melodic phrases there is no mistake; in her words, “We can do what we want.” In pieces with greater complexity, however, “all in one voice” can turn into total cacophony, and songs “can suffer.” She gives the example of one of the choristers’ favorite partisan songs, “Konjuh planinom” (Konjuh Mountain), a melancholic ballad about the death of Petar Marković (“Pejo”), a young partisan fighter and miner from Husinje.¹⁹ A fellow partisan fighter, the philosophy professor and poet Miloš Popović Đurin, wrote the song’s lyrics at the end of 1941 when he witnessed a dramatic night of carrying his fallen comrade and then burying him. Popović added lyrics dedicated to Pejo, who had joined the Ozren partisan unit, a part of the Sixth Proletarian East Bosnian Brigade (*Šesta proleteska istočnobosanska brigada*). After Pejo was mortally wounded in battle in October 1941, his comrades carried him through a storm that lasted the

¹⁸ Edna, interview by the author, July 10, 2017, Pula.

¹⁹ Husinje miners are known for their armed rebellion in the newly established Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, when 7,000 miners from Tuzla, Breza, and Zenica in central Bosnia participated in a strike against the exploitation and class oppression in the village of Husino in Tuzla. During the strike, when the local government tried to force the miners back to work, seven workers were killed, and 400 arrested. With the beginning of World War II, Husinjski miners massively joined the Yugoslav partisan movement.

whole night. The lyrics portray the moment when they arrive at the mountain of Konjuh, realize that he has died, and bury him. Many partisan units adopted the song, and its lyrics of friendship, solidarity, and humanism became widely popular among fighters.²⁰

When speaking about the song, members of Hor 29. Novembar emphasize its emotional power, deriving from its poignant lyrics about the young partisan's tragic death and comradeship. With the song's slow tempo, written in a melodic range of an entire octave, however, they are concerned whether this task is too demanding for them. For this reason, they decide to dedicate more time to practicing so they can perform the song at more conventional stage performances and concerts.

Unlike protests and guerrilla singing, a conventional performance setting presupposes a more intensive preparation since, members believe, a more polished rendition will better endorse a shared feeling and a more intense encounter with the audience. For example, several members of Kombinat recall that their best performance, shown in Figure 3.1, was the one for the state celebration of Resistance Day and the seventieth anniversary of the Liberation Front (Osvobodilna fronta)²¹ in 2011, which took place at perhaps Slovenia's most prestigious venue, Cankarjev dom, Cultural and Congress Centre in Ljubljana. They are fully aware that this view might compromise their activist profile. However, they share the impression that the performance was successful because all members had memorized the song lyrics and were very well prepared. In their belief, this allowed a more direct contact with the audience and transmission of the political ideas in the songs more efficiently: "When you do not have the protection and assistance of a songbook [in your hands, prim. auth.], you interpret the songs differently, with greater concentration."²²

However, regardless of how prepared choirs are and the type of song or the singing context, listening in solidarity remains contingent on the abilities, moods, aspirations, and current vocal and emotional state of those present at the particular rehearsal or performance. Jana reveals that she

²⁰ We can find different stories about the author of the melody. In accordance with the testimony of Oskar Danon, Popović used the melody of the Russian song "Komsomolskoye serdtse" and fighters sung this version until the end of war. In 1945, Danon composed the version that has been known from the end of World War II until today and is performed by activist choirs. Another version tells that the melody of the song "Tam, vdali, za rekoj" (There, far beyond the river, lyrics by Nikolai Kool, 1924), composed by Alexander Vasilyevich Alexandrov in 1928, was used as the basis for "Konjuh planinom."

²¹ The organized anti-fascist military resistance on the territory of Slovenia.

²² Teja, interview by the author, March 28, 2013, Koper.



Figure 3.1 Kombinat’s concert at the state celebration of Resistance Day, Ljubljana, 2011. Author Lorna Lovrečič.

never knows what to expect, even in the more structured context of concert performances: less-skillful members, those with stage fright or less experienced in public performances, usually pull back, but sometimes they come to the fore and start singing loudly under the influence of adrenaline: “They patiently listen to the others at the rehearsals but at concerts not at all. They become overwhelmed by the atmosphere, the presence of the audience, and the experience of singing on stage.”²³

Jana’s reflection reveals how the desire of the members who are shy and withdrawn at the outset to express their voices more freely or achieve confidence may diminish their capacity to listen in solidarity. For this reason, loudness is more valued when it is collective than when it is the expression of the individual. As Lidija, a former conductor of *Le Zbor*, says: “If you are an activist choir, you must be collectively loud.”²⁴ To return to the vignette that opens the previous chapter, *Le Zbor* members insist on loudness to redefine the intended pejorative or offensive meaning of the gender-based stereotype of loud feminists. Praising collective loudness, however, does not mean that

²³ Jana, interview by the author, February 15, 2018, online.

²⁴ Lidija, interview by the author, June 28, 2018, online.

individual loudness is criticized or stigmatized. Instead, members see it as a necessary part of sounding “all in one voice.” Jana tells me that she even sometimes takes as an example a choir member who is known to sing loudly when she wants to motivate all the choir members to be more energetic or loud: “Let’s do it like W. now!” or “This is W’s song, and you can shout as much as you like.”²⁵

For this reason, the best sonic realization of “all in one voice” is during street singing at protests and rallies. There, the choirs’ unamplified aural presence intersects with the noisy sound environment—traffic sounds, sirens, mobile phones, whistles, and drums—and shouting, clapping, or other “extra” musical features that increase the volume. In settings where “we cannot hear each other, even if we have an accompanying guitar,” Jana says, the strategy is to “choose faster songs and shout.” In such cases, loudness helps to include everyone present in becoming, in Srđan’s words, “one big choir.”²⁶

Sincerity, Noise, and Drive

Jana’s and Srđan’s accounts indicate how choir members often associate their aural presence with nonmusical sound or noise. I encounter a telling example when I participate in one of Naša pjesma’s open rehearsals at the Trudbenik Museum. When we start singing, the people gathered in the next room ask us if their noise is disturbing the rehearsal. Laughing, one of the choir members responds that the right question is actually the opposite: is “our noise” disturbing you? On another occasion, members of Horkestar describe their vocal expression in terms of roaring or noisiness: “There are always some of us who creak.”

In both cases, “noise” recalls the untrained collective vocal expression,²⁷ which is inherently energetic and loud, as a result of choir members’ full investment of their vocal and somatic capacities in a performance: “Giving that energy sincerely—this is what is cathartic in Horkestar,” says Ružica,

²⁵ Jana, interview by the author, February 15, 2018, online.

²⁶ Srđan, interview by the author, June 6, 2018, Belgrade.

²⁷ Several critical studies point out that noise and loudness, which in the Global North’s approaches are too often seen as disruptive, have completely different meanings in other contexts. For example, Michael Birenbaum Quintero (2019) argues that liberal sonic actors are imagined as autonomous and able to respond to the role of the state’s imposition of loudness or silence either by creating their own silence and withdrawing from the public sphere or by making public noise to fight back.

explaining: “It is imperative for us to sound alive and sincere.”²⁸ In other words, the noisiness and rawness of their choral sound result from a sincere collective expression, something several studies on amateur music-making also show. Concerning the abovementioned Natural Voice Movement, Caroline Bithell writes that the term “natural voice” is used by amateur choir singers to denote the instinctiveness or authenticity of a voice not classically trained (2014, 16).²⁹ Other authors assert that glitches and rawness that are characteristic of amateur performances are attached to “immediacy,” which stands as the “ostensible counterpoints to suspiciously glossy, elite, or bourgeois production” (Bryan-Wilson and Piekut 2020, 18).

In our conversations, choir members describe their singing as “coming directly from the heart,” characterizing it as honest, sincere, and mobilizing. Julijana from Le Zbor underlines this stance by saying there is no collective sound without sincere expression and emotion.³⁰ Moreover, in order to transmit the political message of the songs, choir members rely upon what they call “drive” (*loženje* in Serbo-Croatian) or “spirit” (*navdih* in Slovenian), claiming that this is what enables the “energy of songs to circulate.”³¹ When talking to media, they maintain that their “sincere belief” in the ideas and values fosters a substantial emotional investment in their vocal expression and, thus, a more powerful evocation of the songs’ affective power.³² “We sing from the bottom of our hearts (*iz petnih žila*),” confirms Nirvana from Praksa in one video interview. In the same video, her fellow member Edna adds that the most important thing is to transmit the emotion they believe the lyrics and melody carry. They assert that it is precisely the drive that elevates them from being solely interpreters of the songs’ content to being the spokespersons of those messages in the present (Benčić, Mario, dir. 2015).

During the performances and public appearances, choir members often speak of partisan songs as acoustic weapons, underscoring that the songs’ political potential lies in their capacity to trigger a strong sensory, emotional, and bodily investment among singers and listeners. Among many

²⁸ Ružica, interview by the author, August 18, 2017, Belgrade.

²⁹ For works that explore the intersection between body, voice, and affect, see Ochoa Gautier 2014; Eidsheim 2019; Jack and Conte 2022.

³⁰ Julijana, interview by the author, June 2, 2018, online.

³¹ Horkestar members, group interview by the author, August 18, 2017, Belgrade.

³² For Richard Middleton, the authenticity and honesty of musical experience have become validating criteria of musical value, particularly in defining emotional experience as “true” (in Moore 2002, 212). Simon Frith also indicates that vocal performance, in which the human body is the main instrument, is considered one of the most significant frameworks for constructing the truth (1996, 197).

choir members' accounts about the affective drive of partisan songs, the one Aleksandar shares over coffee in Vienna is particularly powerful. He recalls the moment of the founding of the activist choir Hor 29. Novembar in 2009: "From just 'let's sing,' we suddenly started experiencing how powerful these songs are, how deeply they touched us. . . . I mean, our bodies shuddered . . . it was such a powerful experience."³³ His statement portrays partisan songs as full of high energy, spirit, and revolutionary fervor.

Over time, however, the songs might also lose their affective potential and become less engaging, less interesting, and less suitable for efficient, "driven" vocal expression. Choir members say that they usually perform the new repertoire with more energy and enthusiasm. When the songs are new, they are more excited while singing, allowing them to fully sound "all in one voice." The initial enthusiasm, however, wanes when a choir has performed a song for a longer time. The online survey I conducted with Kombinat members in 2014–2015 shows that the mobilizing potential of collective vocal expression is strongly related to the frequency of performance. I was surprised to read the choir members' comments saying they had lost their passion for performing "Na oknu glej obrazek bled" (See the pale face on the window),³⁴ although it is one of the most popular Slovenian partisan songs. When I ask why the song is no longer invigorating, they respond that it is because they have performed it too often. In relation to that, one member responds that she cannot wait to learn new songs. The choir's second conductor, Urša, confirms this attitude by saying that choristers are tired of the repertoire they have been performing for the last six years: "They do not feel a drive. They feel they cannot perform energetically and emotionally, giving all of themselves."³⁵

Because constantly performing the same songs can render performance routine and, thereby, diminish genuine passion, to keep the singing's drive high, members make new song arrangements by adding an instrumental accompaniment, additional voices, or an antiphon, a canon-like style in which one group sings a verse that another group repeats. For example, Tanja says that changing the arrangement is crucial for regaining lost enthusiasm despite the fact that listeners might find the unfamiliar elements surprising. However, the attenuated bond can be reinforced if the "energy level" is good enough.³⁶ Majda from Kombinat explains that while singing, choir members

³³ Aleksandar, interview by the author, January 5, 2014, Vienna.

³⁴ For more about this song, see Chapter 6.

³⁵ Urša, interview by the author, January 13, 2014, online.

³⁶ Tanja, interview by the author, October 10, 2018, online.

pay attention to the shifts in people’s reactions to enable the audience to “more easily feel the atmosphere.”³⁷ I also observe how choirs curate an affective drive to engage listeners, by carefully balancing between orchestrating their experience and allowing for spontaneity.³⁸ To fully expose listeners to the repertoire’s energy, spirit, passion, and drive, choir members see greater potential in sing-alongs. For this reason, particularly in concert settings, they usually keep the songs familiar to the audience for the end of the performance. Doing so keeps the drive of the desired encounter from losing its efficacy, which makes the performance monotonous and unpleasant: “Once, we were singing in a youth center, and these young people did not feel us at all. At the end of the performance, we were completely exhausted, as if we had been singing in a vacuum. There was no reaction” (Matoz 2009). Still, a seemingly unresponsive audience need not mean that an affective exchange did not occur. Members sometimes explain that a reaction can come after the performance.

The way choir members employ drive and sincerity in our conversations is close to what Kelley Tatro identifies as “the sense of emotional immediacy.” In her study of Mexico City’s punk vocalists, listeners experience their raw vocalization as energetic and affectively powerful (2014, 436). Yet, she notes that listeners tend to naturalize rather than question the sense of immediacy: even when one has practiced a screaming voice, listeners still perceive it as a spontaneous vocal expression. For this reason, she argues for destabilizing the simplicity of the natural vs. trained binary and shifting the focus toward its “supposed naturalism,” also reporting that an “old repertoire” of punk songs helps to stabilize a sense of familiarity among the listeners (2022, 132).³⁹

In almost all cases I observe, activist choirs’ performances trigger the strong reaction of listeners, primarily by singing along, clapping, shouting, foot stomping, or simply raising fists as a sign of support. Among the most energetic and moving experiences I attend are mass singing events involving all the choir members and passersby, usually during activist choir festivals when the choirs take to the streets, like the street singing during the All in One Voice!—Festival of Activist Choirs in Zagreb (Figure 3.2).

³⁷ Majda, interview by the author, October 29, 2013, Ljubljana.

³⁸ For studies that discuss the deliberate channeling affective experience of music, see Tatro 2014; Conte 2021; Kovačič 2021.

³⁹ Moreover, as Tina Campt asserts, this positive attribute of rawness in punk works differently in the case of (mostly African American) performers, in which rawness is attached to racialized rhetoric of “primitivism” (2020).



Figure 3.2 Street singing at the closing of the third festival of activist choirs, Zagreb, 2018. Author Ivan Maričić, courtesy of the Le Zbor archive.

In particular, the singing of “The Internationale,” due to its special status performed in the style of an anthem—sung a cappella with a standing audience in concert performances and with raised fists—shows how the affective power of the songs also derives from their attachment to historical moments of revolutionary struggles. With that in mind, I will now discuss how such recuperating of the voice of the masses united in the class struggle has specific meanings and consequences in the post-Yugoslav context.

“All in One Voice” against Identitarian Fragmentation

Gathering people with diverse musical skills and levels of musical experience and training questions to what extent sounding “all in one voice”—as the recuperation of the historical voice of the revolutionary masses—can allow for different forms of social belonging or unbelonging today.

To elaborate further, we must acknowledge that in recent explorations, scholars increasingly theorize amateurism as the aesthetic mode that shapes the life and activities of marginalized subjects outside the institutional

setting and funding politics. In reviewing the scholarly approaches to amateurism, Bryan-Wilson and Piecut dedicate much of their attention to amateurism's relationship to racialized and classed subjectivities (2020, 9). Taking the work of Ana Maria Ochoa about the regimes of music knowledge production in nineteenth-century Colombia as an example, they show how the scholarly representations of Indigenous people rely on the categories of nonexpert, untrained, and illiterate. They also demonstrate how the gaze of male “experts” has been historically imposed onto women and minorities (2020, 8–9). For this reason, amateurism gives a voice to “outsiders”: Indigenous people, marginalized or oppressed subjects, and autodidacts (14).

In the literature, raw, untrained vocal expressions are frequently presented in opposition to Western, elite, bourgeois aesthetic standards. For instance, in his writing about the social identification of the voice as a sonic object in Victorian England, Grant Olwage examines associations of the “trained” voice with the upper classes and white European singing traditions. He develops the concept of the “anachronistic voice,” a category that defines all voices that do not resemble the “pure,” “good,” “refined,” and “cultured” bourgeois voice: voices that do not conform to that ideal belong to uncivilized subjects; their supposed rawness, vulgarity, and ugliness are “unpleasant” and even threatening to the Western-educated ear (2004, 206–207). The white, middle-class choral voice, he further writes, stands as both a disciplinary and an aspirational category in cultivating or civilizing projects over anachronistic voices that assume double (or multiple) identities—that of the child, the black person, the member of the working class (2004, 207). His analyses indicate that, historically, the voice of working-class subjects has often been overheard as an unwanted sound, and this fact has also been an important aspect of the working classes' self-awareness and political mobilization.

We might say that sounding “all in one voice” evokes the affective regimes of the anachronistic voice of people in their collective struggle for emancipation. Yet I believe this expression is not simply an act of sonic revitalization of the oppressed political subjectivity. The socialist project in Yugoslavia promoted building new class relations as its primary goal. Working people will eventually dissolve the economic classes and advent a classless society (Archer, Duda, and Stubbs 2016, 34–35). After 1989, the focus on class and the subjectivity of working people has declined, not just

in post-socialist countries but on a global scale. Liberal political discourses have declared the final defeat of the “masses” as a regressive political subject (Mazzarella 2010, 697)⁴⁰ that has remained on the “losing side of history.”

In his research on the class identification of blue-collar workers during late socialism and the early 1990s in Serbia, Goran Musić writes about the systematic neglect of class and labor as analytical categories after the breakup of Yugoslavia (2016, 132). The shift toward nationalist politics and the so-called democratization fostered by the discourses of European integration led to disregarding the previous rhetoric of classless society as backward and harmful to post-socialist nation-states. Recently, several post-Yugoslav scholars have shown how the European Union’s enlargement agenda is informed by the paternalist discourses about Eastern Europeans, who were presented as infantile and immature political subjects (Buden 2014). They have also shown that the EU policies of multiculturalism successfully fused with the nationalistic politics of the post-Yugoslav ruling elites in prioritizing ethnic identity and completely dismissing other politics of belonging, which, in turn, supported ethno-nationalist projects (Petrović 2012). The discourse of ethno-national differences defined the political arena,⁴¹ disregarding class-based solidarity and revolutionary masses’ struggles for equality, an unwanted legacy of the socialist past.

Therefore, advocating for the importance of symbolic and aural capacities that listeners would associate with the shared historical revolutionary class struggle, sounding “all in one voice” opposes the radical segregation along identitarian lines, particularly the politics of belonging based on ethnic identity. In many instances, choir members openly address how such divisions block solidarities and mask the shared problems of capitalist upheaval in the region. For example, in 2014, members of the Viennese *Hor 29. Novembar*

⁴⁰ In a detailed analysis of crowd theory, he traces how the masses from historical perspectives to the modern day have been seen as possessing an unwanted and even dangerous political subjectivity (Mazzarella 2010, 702).

⁴¹ Ethnic identifications (“I” and “we”), shaped in opposition to an ethnic “Other,” were also a central preoccupation of the research on music in the region during the 1990s; see Ramet 1996; Pettan 1998; Gordy 1999. Recently, there has been an increasing interest in (post-)Yugoslav manifestations of ethno-racial inequality, greatly influenced by the globalized discourse of race and the decolonial paradigm (Baker 2018). These views tend to neglect the view from political economy and class and, particularly in the context of socialist Yugoslavia, do not consider the fact that the country had gone through not only ethnic conflict and division but also socioeconomic dissolution (Archer, Duda, and Stubbs 2016, 28). For a critical response to these tendencies, based on their total omission of class considerations, see Ceribašić et al. 2019; Luthar, Petrović, and Bieber 2020; Hofman and Petrović 2023.

organize a public rehearsal in front of the embassy of Bosnia and Herzegovina in solidarity with the workers from the city of Tuzla, who have taken to the streets to protest against the closure of four privatized state enterprises and the related poverty, exploitation, and corruption. Members raise their voices for what they frame as “real solidarity”: the rights of workers regardless of their ethnic affiliations, which they support by carrying the banner “We are all Bosnian workers,” as Figure 3.3 depicts. The banner calls for political identification and mobilization beyond the dominant discourse of solidarity based on ethnicity: “It is certain that the poor, the workers, will develop a common consciousness here and will be strongly attacked from all ethnic corners,” says Ljubomir when explaining the purpose of their street singing (Banu and Diskovic 2014).

This strategic identification with Bosnian workers makes two important statements: post-Yugoslavs need to stand together regardless of their ethnic origin in fighting for their rights, and the class-based solidarities and international socialist legacies in struggling against capitalist exploitation are a necessary part of it. In accordance with that, the repertoire they choose, apart from the usual partisan songs, also includes the “Arbetlose Marsch” (March



Figure 3.3 Hor 29. Novembar at the protest “We are all Bosnian workers,” Vienna, 2014. Author Georg Rosenitsch, courtesy of the Hor 29. Novembar archive.

of the Unemployed),⁴² written in 1937 or 1938 by Mordechai Gebirtig (1877–1942), an influential Yiddish poet and songwriter of the interwar period who was killed in the Kraków Ghetto.

This action exposes how the identity divisions and fragmentations fostered by nationalistic political elites work hand in hand with the neoliberal ideologies of individualism, competition, and exploitation. Explaining to me the idea behind this action in greater detail, Ljubomir says that workers sell their labor regardless of the context and that choir members politicize the figure of migrant workers (*Gastarbeiter*),⁴³ repositioning their political capacity not as an ethnic but as a class-based category.⁴⁴ To emphasize this, they choose the historical repertoire that celebrates class struggles as the most potent symbolic framework for reflection on contemporary global political conditions. In the video “Hor 29. Novembar First Intervention and Class Wargames,” which they made for the occasion of the choir’s first public performance in 2009, members stated: “Our mission is to rearticulate migrants’ position in a new class war through creative intrusions in urban space.”⁴⁵

Through their activities, activist choirs demonstrate that the neoliberal mechanisms of the production of difference hinder the formation of regional and global alliances based on class solidarities, which are essential for combating capitalist exploitation. As Walter Benn Michaels and Adolph Reed argue, neoliberalism exploits the idea of marginalized differences while overlooking the class division at the core of capitalist relations of production. What they call the “liberal disparity discourse” builds on recognizing inequality exclusively through identitarian differences, which dismisses class as a provider of a common ground for broad solidarity and structural transformation (Michels and Reed 2020).

However, the song repertoires that recall class solidarity and the political subjectivity of workers, coupled with the fact that choirs often perform dressed in the blue-collar uniform, occasionally trigger anxieties in post-Yugoslav left-oriented intellectual and activist circles.⁴⁶ Because blue-collar workers rarely participate in choirs’ activities, some have cautioned

⁴² The title of the song includes different variations: “Arbeitsloser Marsch,” “Arbetslose Marsh.”

⁴³ Temporary migrant workers mainly from former Yugoslavia (and Turkey); see Chapter 2 for an explanation.

⁴⁴ Ljubomir, interview by the author, January 10, 2014, Vienna.

⁴⁵ See the video at: <https://youtu.be/Qph5AQo4TPM?t=559> (Alexander Nikolic, dir. 2010).

⁴⁶ As in the case of self-management (and often related to it), artistic production on the subjectivity of worker and workers’ rights has been growing in the last twenty years, particularly in theater and performance art: examples include the theater show *Radnici umiru pevajući* (Workers die singing, 2011) and *Radnička hronika* (Worker’s chronicle, 2021).

that members’ engagement with class solidarity is an act of “aestheticizing,” romanticizing, and even essentializing workers’ political subjectivity.⁴⁷ The anxiety primarily derives from the membership structure of activist choirs, mainly consisting of urban, educated, and middle- and upper-middle-class younger people who do not share the same realities as the workers they sing about. According to these criticisms, the danger lies in essentializing the political figure of a worker as a deprived subject unable to talk and act in his or her own name. Consequently, this kind of activism might end up as naïve or unproductive lifestyle politics that fails to reflect on the “real,” everyday struggles of working-class people, significantly limiting the class-interest politics about which they sing.

I often observe choir members reacting to such criticism with full awareness of their incapacity to mobilize wider masses, particularly blue-collar workers, underprivileged groups, and individuals who cannot take time away from wage labor to join choirs.⁴⁸ They acknowledge choirs’ limited ability to help them organize on the ground but still insist on collective singing as a powerful tool for channeling collective feelings in political action.⁴⁹ For example, they stand for the importance of singing activism in expressing solidarity, raising awareness, and motivating people to think about political reality (Reitsamer 2016, 72).

In our discussion about the stances disregarding the choir’s activities as the apolitical aestheticization of the working class, Marko, a member of Hor 29. Novembar, explains that for him, the only “real” engagement in the current political circumstances is to constantly learn how to fight each other’s struggles without the burden or (self-)censorship imposed by identitarian regimes. He frames it: “We must be able to cross that bridge. Otherwise, this is the end of solidarity. We are left without any politics in the common interest.”⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Some criticize the artistic romanticizing of industrial, blue-collar workers and their relationship to state-socialism. I further discuss the anxieties regarding aestheticization in Chapter 6.

⁴⁸ I find similar observations in scholarly accounts of the art-related activist engagement in the region. For instance, Larisa Kurtović writes that people involved in the project of activist archiving in Bosnia and Herzegovina are often criticized in intellectual circles and public discourse as detached from ordinary people. She notes that “the work of ‘slow activism’ can sometimes be dismissed as the domain of the privileged, people who do not need to react to the ongoing state of emergency” (2019, 19). However, her analysis further reveals that, in building the archive of the lived experiences of workers’ in the Dita detergent factory in Tuzla, workers did not lack interest in activists’ projects (2019, 21).

⁴⁹ A persistent concern has been that expressive practices fail to engage with real-life struggles, remaining instead in imaginary, aspirational discourses (see, e.g., an excellent reflection by Garcia 2018).

⁵⁰ Marko, interview by the author, January 9, 2020, Vienna.

His reflection further exposes how criticism attached to the appropriation of a particular group of people or singing “in the name of workers” derives from a general inability to act beyond our “given” identity positions (as female, Black, minority, etc.), as Rancière put it (1992, 59).⁵¹ In other words, sounding “all in one voice” intervenes in the liberal politics of representation, which dismisses any speaking (or singing) on behalf of others as immoral or paternalist behavior.⁵²

In this regard, I concur with Connor that chorality, as experienced in the West, is not an expression of collective intentionality but rather “a kind of projection or fantasy” (2016, 20). Although pessimistic about the political effects of collective vocalizations in the twenty-first century, Connor does not deny the possibility that the fantasy of collectivity—as long as the fantasy is not a private or individual but a collective endeavor—might enable new forms of collective action (2016, 21). Despite its limitations and ambiguities, I see choirs’ sounding “all in one voice” as the intervention in the incapacity imposed by the endless identity and social fragmentation at the core of neoliberal exhaustion. The affective power of “all in one voice” nurtures and sustains belief in the possibility of class solidarities. However, it neither invites class as another category of identification along with ethnicity, race, gender, sex, or legal status, nor aims to embody a working-class identity *per se*. Who has the right to express voice certainly remains relevant, but instead of identifying with working masses as an instance of a particular “class identity,” choirs’ performative strategy reminds us of strengthening class-consciousness as the first step toward the transformations of capitalist social relations.

⁵¹ I agree that we have to be careful in applying a generalized Rancièrian understanding of politics and the aesthetic order, as it does not account for the variety of historical and geographical contexts, genres, and performance settings, since Rancière’s understanding of aesthetic regimes derives from the history and practice of Western European high art (Brackett 2017, 119). However, I find some of his arguments on the politics of equality widely resonating with the strivings of activist choirs.

⁵² Who speaks for whom and with what authority—as “representative claim”—is an urgent political question; see Saward 2010.

A Repertoire of Revolution

It is 2015, and the activists of the NGO Oštra Nula¹ from Banja Luka have asked me to help them organize a singing intervention at the official commemoration of the Battle of Kozara. A mountain in western Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kozara is the symbol of the biggest World War II battle in this part of Europe, celebrated as a great act of heroic sacrifice by Yugoslav partisans and civilians who gave their lives to fight the Nazi forces.² In 1972, the memorial complex at Kozara National Park, which included a monument, a memorial wall, and a museum, opened on the site of Mrakovica on one of Kozara's peaks.³ After the breakup of Yugoslavia, Kozara National Park fell into neglect, just like many other memorial sites dedicated to the socialist past, and the official commemoration ceased. In 2000, the government of Republika Srpska, led by Milorad Dodik, the leader of the nationalistic Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (SNSD) party, renewed the commemoration.

In an email exchange with Oštra Nula activists, I am surprised to learn that the renewed commemoration has introduced a Christian Orthodox religious service dedicated to the fallen partisans before a newly erected cross at the commemoration site.⁴ They explain that this addition reflects the new politics of remembrance that reinterprets the Yugoslav partisan resistance as the Serbs' national uprising.⁵ Oštra Nula sees that the collective singing

¹ The organization's name in English means Sharp Zero, which carries a connotation of absurdity. Oštra Nula was founded in 2009 to advocate active citizenship, particularly in the field of social justice and memory politics. It operates on a voluntary basis and is open to anyone interested. For more about them, see: <https://ostranula.org/>.

² The third offensive, or Operation West Bosnia, was fought between the Yugoslav partisans and the Axis forces (the Germans with the support of Ustasha and Chetnik collaborators) in June and July 1942. After thirty-eight days of continuous fighting, the outnumbered partisan battalions and civilian defense fell apart. Although a defeat, the siege was later celebrated for the extreme courage and sacrifice of fighters and civilians alike.

³ On the monument created by Dušan Džamonja, see Kirn and Burghardt 2012; Horvatinčić 2015.

⁴ This practice is happening across Republika Srpska, the federal entity that encompasses Kozara, where crosses are also being erected in other partisan memorial complexes, such as Sutjeska (Hajdarpašić 2020).

⁵ During the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, this area's non-Serbian population (Bosnian Muslims and Croats) was subject to ethnic cleansing by the members of the future Army of Republika Srpska

of partisan songs could be a suitable intervention to remind of the multi-ethnic profile of the PLS. They want to sing for everyone “erased” by this commemoration: Muslims, Croats, Slovenians, and others. I suggest several songs appropriate for ad hoc singing and enticing the active participation of the attendees.

A week later, I am happy to hear that the intervention went well and attracted much media attention. The police arrested some singers for public safety violations. However, most of the media stood in their defense, commenting on the paradox of filing charges against people for singing partisan songs at a commemoration dedicated to the partisan resistance. After being released, Dražen, one of the activists, gives an inspiring statement for Oštra Nula’s website: “What took place on Kozara with our singing is not just a memory but the living speech of Kozara, the rebirth of resistance. . . . Absolutely everything [the government has done] goes into this process [of erasure], which reveals the extremely wide horizon of historical revisionism, the massive privatization of the common good, and the criminal accumulation of capital within national borders” (M.P. 2015).

Due to our continued collaboration, I decide to join the singing the following year, but our intervention is a total failure. We plan to perform some popular partisan pieces, including “Oj Kozaro” (Oh, Kozara), “Na Kordunu grob do groba” (Countless graves on Kordun),⁶ and “Po šumama i gorama,” as the year before. However, we cannot foresee that the organizers will stage a performance of partisan songs by a female singing group as part of the program. As we approach the commemoration site, we hear the well-known melodies of the songs we have rehearsed just an hour earlier. In the first row, we see the “VIP guests” of high-ranking politicians from Republika Srpska and the Republic of Serbia. After the initial surprise, we decide to sing anyway. However, as soon as we start, it is clear we cannot compete with the amplified sound coming from the stage, which forces us to stop.

and the paramilitary forces from Serbia. The nationalistic politics have persisted after the war, and the National Park’s Museum exhibition fosters nationalistic narratives by presenting the anti-fascist resistance in World War II as the Serbs’ rebellion against Nazi, Ustasha, and Muslim forces. This not only downplays the contributions of the ethnically diverse population of the region at the time but uses the suffering of the Serbian population by collaborationist forces (particularly Ustasha) as an excuse for the crimes committed in the last war, further reinforcing ethnic divisions and hatred (about the exhibition, see Karačić, Banjeglav, and Govedarica 2012, 32–36).

⁶ Common translation glosses for this title are “On Kordun, grave is next to grave” and “On Kordun, grave to grave.” Kordun is the region in Central Croatia bordered by the Lika region to the south and Banija to the east.

This time, it is not the police who interrupt the singing intervention but the fact that our singing has lost its meaning. Listening to the polished, trained voices of soloists singing verses about the partisan struggle evokes a feeling of disappointment. Our disappointment results from the feeling that our voices are not simply silenced but stolen. It forces us to consider that the songs' uses and meanings depend greatly on different performing and listening contexts. We must also accept that singing activism is an ambiguous political strategy.

* * *

This chapter explores how choir members navigate the contested performing and listening histories attached to the repertoire they perform. I will first give an overview of the genre of partisan songs, its sonic presence during World War II, and its afterlife during and after Yugoslavia. As a sonic assemblage of various historical periods, geographical places, and sociopolitical contexts, I see partisan songs as close to what Benjamin Tausig, quoting Eric Drott, defines as the "historical" or "symbolic repertoire" (2019, 36). Its mobilization of historical symbols, moments, and figures in present political struggles demands a careful approach. Through an ethnographic lens, I show how choirs strategically chose the songs and performance contexts and offer an extensive commentary on the songs' recuperation. Choir members thus strive for a "proper" listening to the songs, one that opposes both historical revisionism and the appropriation of partisan legacies by the political elites. As they strategize to regain the political power of a repertoire of revolution, choir members find themselves burdened by the weight of rejecting sentimentality without also rejecting the multifaceted lived experiences of the Yugoslav socialist project.

Partisan Songs

The PLS was a historical moment of vibrant musical expression that revitalized and reinvented the song repertoires of past local and international struggles. Songs were an effective tool for motivating, supporting, and mobilizing fighters for combat, sharing news, and coping with the extreme harshness of the wartime experience. As quoted in the partisan songbook *Naše pjesme* (Our songs): "During our glorious liberation struggle, amid the

raging war and the smoke of burned homes, from the blood and tears and heroic ventures of thousands of our fighters, new songs have emerged—fighting songs, songs of new aspirations that give us faith in victory” (Hercigonja, Špiler, and Devčić 1942; 1944).

Historical sources testify that a primary feature of the repertoire sung in the partisan units was the intersection between two main groups of songs—folk songs from various parts of Yugoslavia and “mass” songs, consisting of Yugoslav workers’ revolutionary, and combat songs, many of them translated or modified international pieces from different historical periods and contexts. In the edition of *Naše pjesme* from 1946 (see the cover in Figure 4.1), the editors noted that partisan fighters initially sang a repertoire consisting of old “domestic” (Yugoslav), Soviet, French, and Spanish songs (songs from the October Revolution and the Spanish Civil War); other international workers’ and leftist songs from the 1920s and 1930s; songs of peasants’ uprisings; and the folk songs that they brought from their homes (Hercigonja, Špiler, and Devčić 1945, 7).⁷

Along with the folk songs, the most popular songs were “Po šumama i gorama”; the prewar songs “Bilećanka” (Song from Bileće) and “Nabrusimo kose” (Let us sharpen our scythes);⁸ a piece from the October Revolution, “Smelo, tovarishchi, v nogu!” (Comrades, let’s bravely march!), that appeared in a Serbo-Croatian version as “Budi se istok i zapad” (The East and the West are rising) and a Slovenian version as already mentioned, “Bratje, le k soncu svobodi”; the Russian pre–World War II song “Katyusha,” which gained popularity as a World War II anti-fascist song; the Spanish civil war songs “¡Ay Carmela!” and “A las barricadas” (To the barricades); and “Bella Ciao,” the Italian partisan song that receives my special attention in the last chapter of the book.

The diversity of the song repertoire performed by partisan fighters and people in the liberated territories made the terminology associated with it also diverse: combat songs, mass songs, anti-fascist songs, our songs, revolutionary songs, partisan songs. Certain terms, however, were still more related to the particular group: revolutionary songs were more attached to the international

⁷ For further description of partisan songs and their role in the PLS, see the prefaces of the songbooks *Naše pjesme* (Hercigonja, Špiler, and Devčić 1942; 1944; 1945); *Slovenske partizanske pesmi* (1942); *Krajiške narodne pjesme iz NOB-a i socijalističke izgradnje* (Milošević 1949); *Zbornik partizanskih narodnih napeva* (Hercigonja and Danon 1962).

⁸ Both songs were written by Milan Apih (1906–1992), a writer, pre–World War II Yugoslav communist activist, partisan fighter, and post–World War II politician. He wrote the first song in 1936 after the Polish melody of an unknown author and the second in a political prison camp in Bileća, a town located in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

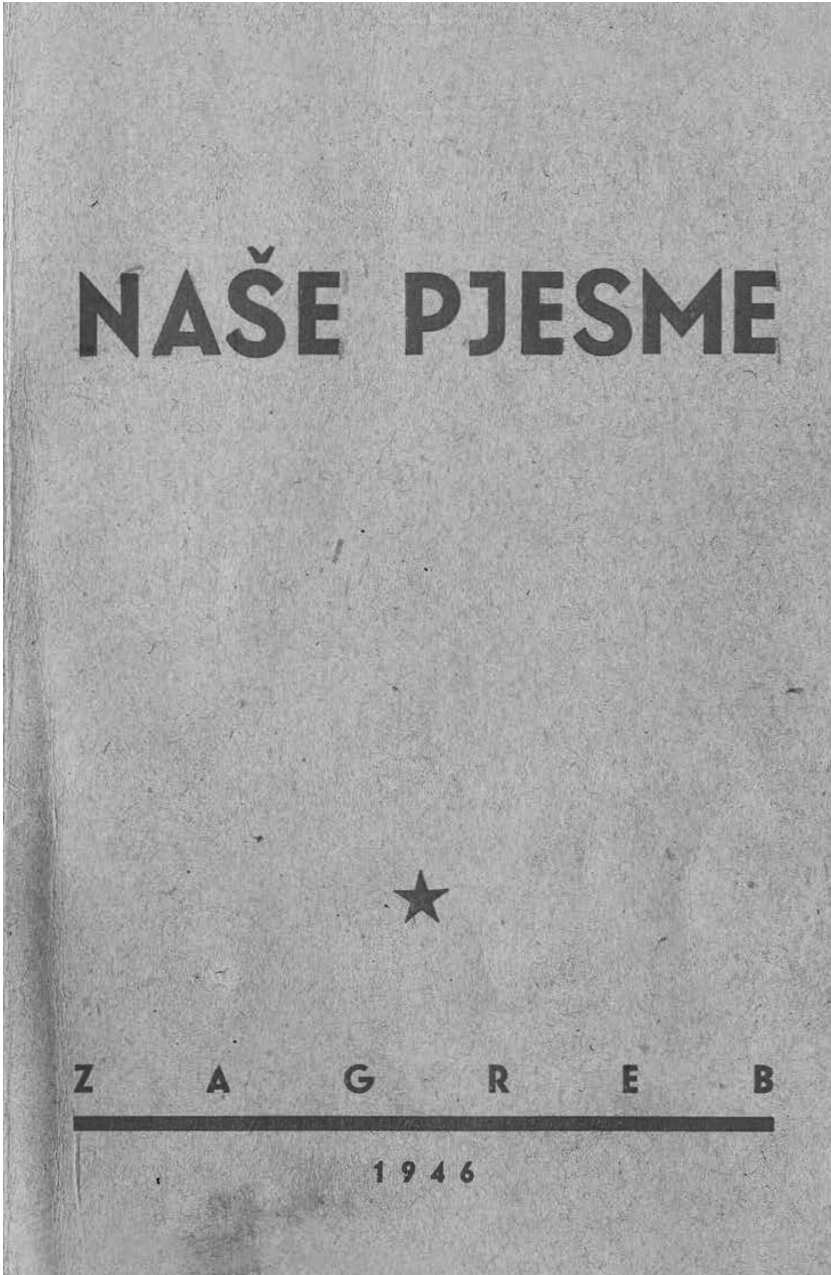


Figure 4.1 Cover of the partisan songbook *Naše pjesme* (Our songs), 1945, 3rd edition.

repertoire, mass songs, for the pieces composed by the prominent composers/partisans, whereas combat songs and partisan songs were broader terms that also included folk songs (Vukobratović 2024). The majority of these notions were formed after the war and during the “canonizing” of this repertoire. Yugoslav folklorist Maja Bošković-Stulli uses “partisan songs” as the umbrella term to depict a bricolage of folk songs, workers’ songs, revolutionary songs, and combat songs from previous wars and revolutions that partisan fighters constantly adapted to the demands of the actual moment (1960).⁹ A prime example of this is “Padaj silo i nepravdo” (May you be destroyed, force and injustice), a song inspired by the uprising led by Matij Ivanić on the Dalmatian island of Hvar (today’s Croatia) from 1510 to 1514. It is based on the lyrics of “Slobodarka,” written by Josip Smodlaka in 1908. Composer Josip Hatze wrote the melody, which would become one of the most popular songs among Yugoslav partisans during World War II, particularly in Dalmatian units.¹⁰

Padaj silo i nepravdo,
narod ti je sudit zvan,
bjež’te od nas noćne tmine,
svanuo je i naš dan!

Gradove smo vam podigli,
turne, kule gradili,
od uvijek smo roblje bili,
i za vas smo radili!

Pravo naše ugrabljeno,
amo natrag dajte nam,
ne date li, ne molimo,
uzet će ga narod sam!

Nevolja će biti vela,
po palači tvrdimi,
kad vidite da sa sela,
s mašklinima gremo mi.

⁹ Despite this label, some researchers emphasize that the production of partisan songs should not be limited to 1941–1945, as the genealogy of the genre dates back to the prewar period (Nazor 1990) and continues postwar (Križnar 1992).

¹⁰ For more about the genealogy of the song, see Anić 1977.

Nastati će novo doba,
 Matija Ivaniću,
 ustati ćeš tad iz groba,
 s tobom u boj poći ću.

Zastava će nova viti,
 iznad naših glava tad.
 Radnik seljak jedno biti,
 isti im je trud i rad!

May you be destroyed, force and injustice!
 The people have been called to judge you.
 Flee from us, darkness of the night,
 Our day too, has dawned.

Our stolen rights,
 Come give them back to us!
 If you do not give them,
 The people themselves will seize them.

We have built cities for you,
 Built buildings and towers.
 Forever we have been slaves,
 And for you we labored.

The misfortune will be great
 In the palace
 When you see that from the villages,
 We are advancing with pickaxes.

A new age will begin,
 O Matija Ivanić!
 You will rise then from the grave,
 With you into battle I will go!

A new flag will flutter
 Above our heads then.
 The workers, the peasant, will be one,
 Their labor is the same!

Crafting new songs meant that folk tunes from different parts of Yugoslavia gained new lyrics depicting the partisan struggle against fascism and capitalist exploitation and promoting a new social structure. Among others were “Ide Tito preko Romanije” (Tito goes through Romania), “Oj narode Like i Korduna” (Oh, people of Lika and Kordun), “Kraj Sutjeske hladne vode” (Along Sutjeska, the cold river), “Na Kordunu grob do groba,” and “Oj Kozaro” or “Kozaračko kolo” (Kolo from Kozara). The songs were based on two traditional musical forms—epic songs and dance songs (*p(j)esme u kolu*), the so-called *bečarac* in the form of rhymed couplets that accompanied dancing in Slavonia and Vojvodina.¹¹ According to written testimonies, through their spontaneous interactions, fighters from various generational, geographical, and sociocultural backgrounds typically adjusted existing songs and created new ones. The constant movement of partisan units due to the guerrilla form of fighting demanded adjusting musical features and lyrics to fast-changing circumstances, which means that many songs were conceived ad hoc or “along the way.”

As a repertoire of revolution, partisan songs were used in building the symbolic imaginary about the heroic struggle of Yugoslav people after World War II. Much of this repertoire was prominent in the official memorialization of the PLS as the foundational narrative of socialist Yugoslavia. Partisan songs were arranged by well-known composers, primarily for mixed semiprofessional choirs, symphonic orchestras, and military bands, and were often performed in the context of state celebrations. Although the socialist state-building apparatus adapted partisan songs to fit these contexts, the cultural politics still did not ignore their everyday listening and performing. The songs also played a visible role in sustaining revolutionary enthusiasm as an important aspect of building the new socialist society.¹² For this reason, this repertoire found its way into popular music by the end of the 1950s. It could be heard at festivals but was also recorded, and distributed through radio and TV. Performers from various musical styles and genres, such as jazz ensembles or pop bands, rearranged the songs (Vasiljević 2013, 125) and recorded LPs with the purpose of popularizing them for the wider listenership. Later in the 1980s, the Yugoslav partisan struggle also found its way into rock music, such as the New Partisans movement, which explicitly referred to the legacies of partisan resistance and revolution. The groups active in this

¹¹ For more about musical characteristics of the songs, see Hofman 2004, 2011a.

¹² For more about socialist staging politics, see my article “Questioning Socialist Folklorisation” (2011a) and book “Staging Socialist Femininity” (2011c).

movement originated with genuine enthusiasm and a desire to reevaluate the fading values of partisan resistance and revolution.¹³

Therefore, partisan songs' performing and listening histories prove that we cannot reduce their sonic presence to the simple workings of the party or socialist state. Given that the meaning and uses of this repertoire were not univocal, its recuperation is a challenging task.

Singing against Revisionism

The discrediting, or even discarding, of the entire socialist period and its foundational PLS has strongly informed the post-Yugoslav memory politics. According to historian Oto Luthar, the discourse of historical revisionism presupposes a rewriting of the history of World War II in what its proponents claim is a supposedly more objective manner. The previously clear division between the liberators, that is, the anti-fascist resistance movement, and the collaborationists, who helped Nazi occupiers, became a subject of reinterpretation within the new memory culture based on the ethnic "we" (2013, 884). He writes that the revisionist discourses in Slovenia reframe the collaboration with the Nazi occupiers as an act of patriotism to prevent establishing the undemocratic communist regime. They relativize the anti-fascist resistance as an unquestionable act against Nazi occupation by pushing the communist crimes to the front (Luthar and Uhl 2019, 4) and insist on the equal recognition of the crimes from both the fascist and the communist sides (Luthar 2013, 890). Such a remaking of history has resurfaced the ethnic divisions by rehabilitating the collaborationists and diminishing the multiethnic profile of the PLS. Revisionism, in short, has been a tool in the hands of nationalists to discard any positive reference to the PLS and Yugoslav socialism in building new nation-states. The memorial landscape is being reconfigured by introducing new commemorations and destroying or transforming old partisan monuments (e.g., adding a cross or a national flag). Simultaneously, new monuments celebrating the former collaborationists, now present heroes, have been erected, often directly on the sites where partisan monuments were removed (Kirn 2020, 213). It is not only that the struggles over the "right" interpretation supply the categories

¹³ Yet, their attempts often fell flat as an ironic reflection of the system. For more on the partisan themes in popular music, see Hofman and Pogačar 2017.

of fascism and anti-fascism with new meanings, but the past has become more unpredictable than the future, as Boris Buden points out (Buden et al. 2013, 7).¹⁴

However, the so-called crisis of the anti-fascist paradigm has not only been limited to former state-socialist societies but has also affected Western historiographies in the last decades (García et al. 2016, 1). The struggles over the meaning and legacy of anti-fascism started already in the late 1980s, before the fall of the Berlin Wall (see Traverso 2016). As in the East, the “marriage” between anti-fascism and state socialism was subject to wider debates and confrontations. The main concern was the role of anti-fascism in legitimizing “totalitarian communism” in socialist Eastern Europe (García et al. 2016, 2, 4). Therefore, every positive reference to anti-fascism has been seen as an “unhealthy amnesia” about the crimes of communism. The new public cultures of memory after 1989 have been built on the discourse about socialism as an enemy of liberal democracy, which required that the memory politics of former socialist countries go through a “democratic revaluation.”

Precisely because it is a powerful index for the Yugoslav partisan resistance and socialist revolution, performing and listening to partisan songs after the dissolution of Yugoslavia has been a counter-response to the revisionist tendencies. The “original” songs and their popular music covers celebrating the anti-fascist resistance and a multicultural Yugoslavia have offered people a chance to listen against the nationalist memory politics of post-Yugoslav states (see Jansen 2005, 256; Hofman and Pogačar 2017). One of the first interventions of this kind was the compilation *Tistega lepega dne* (On that beautiful day), published in Ljubljana in 1996, featuring well-known Slovenian musicians performing covers of partisan and revolutionary songs. Writing about this compilation, sociologist Mitja Velikonja argues that recalling the partisan resistance is an attempt to make a clear distinction between the past multicultural, socialist, communitarian, and revolutionary Yugoslavia and the present-day nationalist, capitalist, and conformist Slovenia (2013a, 50, 61–62).¹⁵

Since 2011, musicians in the region have been reestablishing closer collaboration through live performances and album recordings of popular songs

¹⁴ On historical revisionism in the area of former Yugoslavia, see Katz 2008; Karačić, Banjeglav, and Govedarica 2012; Luthar 2013; Luthar and Uhl 2019; Pušnik and Luthar 2020.

¹⁵ The Slovenian context has its own specificities, but it also shares important commonalities with other parts of the post-Yugoslav region.

by Yugoslav authors,¹⁶ including covers of partisan songs. The 2012 CD compilation *Zajednička borba* (Common fight) features bands whose music promotes anti-fascist ideas, a result of collaboration between anti-fascist organizations from all republics of the former Yugoslavia. The CD includes twenty-three songs, mainly in the punk rock genre. It also features electronic music, hip-hop performers, and singer-songwriters, including mainstream musicians already known for their anti-fascist public profiles, like Darko Rundek and Rambo Amadeus. On its website, the publisher, Anti-fascist Action of Bosnia and Herzegovina (Antifašistička akcija BiH), promoted the CD as “much more than just music,” calling it an urgent response to “the dominant ideologies of nationalism and fascism in post-Yugoslav societies.” In the CD booklet, the producers also openly confront the erasure of the memory of the PLS from official commemorative practice, a result of the aggressive ethnicization of the memorial landscape and historical revisionism. As a further goal, they hope to set up a network of anti-fascist groups and individuals in a wider transnational context to promote humanity, equality, and solidarity.¹⁷

Similarly, choir members often tell me that because official politics insist on ethnic division, segregation, and difference, Yugoslav popular music that evokes a spirit of brotherhood and unity has, along with partisan songs, an important place in their repertoire. Songs written and performed by songwriters and bands active during Yugoslav times, like Arsen Dedić, Električni orgazam, EKV, KUD Idijoti, and Hladno pivo, hold special importance for them. All of them maintain a symbolic connection between the PLS, socialism, and anti-nationalism, which, as Prota explains, has granted the popular music of the former Yugoslavia the status of a new repertoire of revolution, one that carries the subcultural transformative potential.¹⁸

Singing the songs written by Yugoslav authors also allows choirs to convey messages against ethnicization of the cultural sphere by singing in “other post-Yugoslav languages.” Choirs go for a mixture of specific words, pronunciations, or styles characteristic of different varieties of the

¹⁶ For more about the proliferation of musical reinterpretations of the anti-fascist and socialist past after 2000, see Hofman and Pogačar 2017.

¹⁷ The CD booklet includes Umberto Eco's essay “Ur-fascism” (1995) and a photo of Mate Parlov, the most popular boxer in Yugoslavia and a prominent anti-fascist. The photograph on the cover shows the female partisan Milja Marin (1926–2007), known as Kozarčanka; see <https://www.inmedia.ba/muzickari-iz-regiona-ujedinjeni-u-akciji-zasto-sam-antifasista/> (“Muzičari iz regiona ujedinjeni u akciji ‘Zašto sam antifasista’” 2013).

¹⁸ Prota, interview by the author, October 28, 2019, Belgrade.

once common Serbo-Croatian (Croato-Serbian) language. This strategy articulates a refusal of the dominant post-Yugoslav language ideology and standardization politics, which promulgates Serbian, Croatian, Bosnian, and Montenegrin as separate languages and as important markers of the respective ethnic identities.¹⁹ Another tactic is changing the language of partisan songs from Croatian pronunciation to Serbian or vice versa.²⁰ For example, the name of the Belgrade-based choir Naša pjesma (after the title of the partisan songbook) is in the “Ijekavian” pronunciation, associated with Croatia, instead of “Ekavian,” characteristic of Serbia, the choir’s home country. In such cases, the pronunciation or language in which songs are sung becomes itself a disruption—associated with the former Yugoslav nations, recent enemies who are now new neighbors—the nation-state’s unwanted sound.

However, the most common practice is singing songs in their original language. Apart from those listed above, these can include English, Spanish, German, Italian, French, Russian, Farsi, and Kurdish. This practice allows the songs to be listened to within the framework of international leftist sensibility and solidarity. For example, choirs most often perform “¡Ay Carmela!” (also known as “Viva la quince brigada”)—a song about the resistance and solidarity in the International Brigades during the Spanish Civil War based on a folk tune from the Peninsular War, Spain’s war for independence from Napoleon’s France in the early nineteenth century. There are many popular covers of this song by musicians worldwide, including Pete Seeger and the Almanac Singers, who recorded it in the 1940s. Choirs sing a version written by Yugoslav rock singer Darko Rundek, who released it on his 2000 album *U širokom svijetu* (In the wide world). Le Zbor was the first of the choirs to cover the song and make a video in 2011, dedicating it to the fight against homophobia, transphobia, and biphobia.²¹ As depicted in Figure 4.2, Horkestar was next to perform it during the 2015–2016 protests when the Serbian government began to gentrify the Savamala area of Belgrade for the purpose

¹⁹ Language politics after the breakup of Yugoslavia reflect an overall ethnicization of the cultural and political landscape. In socialist Yugoslavia, all the languages of nations and nationalities were considered official languages. However, the majority of the population spoke Serbo-Croatian/Croato-Serbian. It was the language spoken in Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro, while Macedonian was officially spoken in Macedonia and Slovenian in Slovenia.

²⁰ Serbo-Croatian/Croato-Serbian was standardized in the nineteenth century, even before the establishment of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. Differences between the Serbian and the Croatian standards always existed, however, and there are several dialects of Serbo-Croatian/Croato-Serbian. On language politics in the post-Yugoslav context, see Bugarski and Hawkesworth 2004; Bugarski 2018.

²¹ Video at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_gRVYr8v2u0 (Le Zbor, dir. 2011).



Figure 4.2 Horkestar singing at the protest *Ne davimo Beograd* (Do not let Belgrade d(r)own) against the Belgrade Waterfront project, 2016. Courtesy of Horkestar members.

of developing the massive elite residential-commercial complex called the Belgrade Waterfront.²² Attending the events, I observe how their singing elevated “*¡Ay Carmela!*” to an informal anthem of the protests.

After the protest rally in May 2016, a friend sends me a video of Horkestar’s cover of “*¡Ay Carmela!*” with modified song’s lyrics mentioning the mayor of Belgrade and the towers (*kule*), a symbol of the Belgrade Waterfront, accompanied by two guitars, an abandonero, and a drum.²³ Choir members are depicted as singing in the Savamala area, which has already been transformed into a construction site. The video ends with an invitation to join the next protest rally by seemingly inviting people to join the choir: “Be

²² What triggered the unrest was the death of a building guard in this area, assumed to have been attacked by the municipality constabulary representatives (*komunalna policija*) during the forced eviction of the Savamala inhabitants. Located near the central railway station, this area was also where Syrian, Afghan, and other refugees found temporary shelter in parks and abandoned buildings. For more about the changes of soundscapes around Savamala in the context of mass forced migrations along the Balkan migrant route in 2015, see Medić 2017.

²³ Choir members also carried flags with the mascot of the initiative Do not let Belgrade d(r)own, the yellow duck. See the video at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Swh69bhW0U> (nedavimobeograd. 2016).



Figure 4.3 Kombinat singing in front of the barbed wire on Slovenia's southern border, 2015.

part of the most important gig in the city. No audition. Everyone is important. Whose city? Whose voice? Sunday 11. 6. 2016, 18h.”²⁴

Another video of the same song features members of Kombinat standing in front of the barbed wire erected on Slovenia's southern border, as shown in Figure 4.3. It came to me during the protests in Slovenian cities during the same period of 2015–2016 organized within the Refugees Welcome initiative, which aimed to help Syrian and Afghan refugees as they made their way across the so-called Balkan route.²⁵ The video begins with a choir member holding a speech about the state's “brutality, single-mindedness, restriction, and dehumanization” while pointing to the wire behind her. Like Horkestar, the choir sings Rundek's cover of “¡Ay Carmela!,” starting with the original verses in Spanish and continuing with the adapted lyrics in Slovenian expressing an anti-homophobic, anti-racist, and anti-capitalist message: “Let the spirit of rebellion induce us to cut down fences, our song

²⁴ In the original: “Budi deo najbitnije svirke u gradu. Nema audicije. Svi smo važni. Čiji grad? Čiji glas?”

²⁵ The barbed wire in front of which the members of Kombinat sang on December 10, 2015, was set up by the Slovenian government as a means to control the refugee flows to Slovenia. Civil society actors understood the erection of the wire as a clear act of official anti-refugee policy that is a part of a more general official policy to view migration as disruptive and undesirable (Zavratnik and Cukut Krilić 2016, 250) and as a sign of a general rise of fascism and racism in the European Union.

will defy the dictatorship of capital,”²⁶ to finish with another adopted line in Serbo-Croatian saying that authorities must remove the wire.

As in Horkestar’s video, the last verse of “¡Ay Carmela!” is sung a cappella most loudly with the raised-fist salute: “Where this song is heard, there the heart wins!” (*Gdje se ova pjesma čuje, tamo srce pobjeđuje!*). Taking part in these protests as well, I observe how chanting along with “¡Ay Carmela!” in Spanish, Slovenian, and Serbo-Croatian builds up the strength to fight against nationalism, fascism, structural racism, and exclusion that emanate from capitalism, which Julijana from Le Zbor explains as: “People in the former Yugoslavia have similar oppressors and ‘¡Ay Carmela!’ is a symbol of resistance to the corrupted post-socialist system we all live in.”²⁷

Singing in various languages still demands effort, especially regarding strategic amateurism’s participatory and improvisational nature. For this reason, choirs (self-)produce songbooks, which serve as an essential tool for helping members learn the songs during rehearsals and performances. They are also necessary for engaging the listeners, which is why the songbooks are distributed to those present at street singing events or protests. Srđan from Naša pjesma confirms what I have already noticed: as a piece of paper, a songbook can be quickly shared and is an excellent tool to mobilize people for ad hoc singing or to sing along.²⁸ At concert performances, audiences can find songbooks at the entrance (usually with T-shirts or other material on a table).

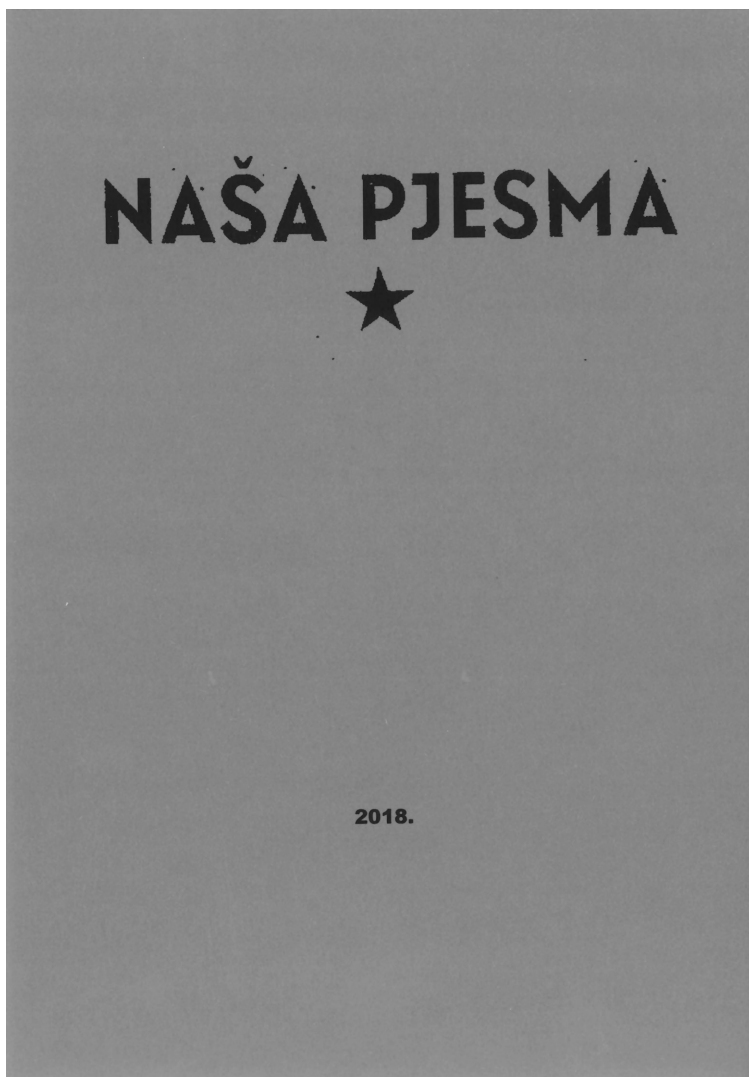
The songbooks consist of lyrics, basic available data about every song (the names of the composer and the lyricist, if known, and the year/period of origin), and a short contextual note or, in some cases, an explanation of the purpose of the songs’ revitalization. Printed inexpensively on recycled or standard paper, the songbooks are black and white, sometimes with a colorful front page. For instance, Naša pjesma produce their songbook as a fanzine, which gives them a street-friendly, unconventional format to put forward contextual information and commentaries about the songs that explain their relevance today (Figure 4.4).

While collecting choirs’ songbooks, I have observed how they have changed over time, as members constantly expand and update them, adding

²⁶ See the video at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Agt7OF42CTk> (mاتيwde, dir. 2015). The original Slovenian verse “Naj zaveje duh vstaje, da porežemo ograje, naša pesem bo kljubovala diktaturi kapitala” refers to the anti-government and anti-austerity unrest in Slovenia in 2012, which I describe at the opening of the book.

²⁷ Interview by the author, June 2, 2018, online.

²⁸ Srđan, interview by the author, June 6, 2018, Belgrade.



**Naša pjesma je antifašistički hor.
Pevamo revolucionarne, radničke, partizanske,
masovne pesme.
Ne zadovoljavamo se sadašnjicom.**

Figure 4.4 Naša pjesma's songbook cover, 2018. Courtesy of the Naša pjesma archive.

new songs and excluding those not actively performed anymore. I learn that songbooks are not just for performance purposes but also serve as a tool to recover lost knowledge about the socialist revolutionary legacies that the formal educational system has silenced.²⁹ For the generations who did not have an opportunity in school to learn about the PLS and Yugoslav socialism or about international histories of revolutionary and workers' struggles, as well as for older generations of people who may have forgotten their knowledge of this historical period, choirs' performances are "a history class about the forgotten past," as the media reports about Kombinat (Matoz 2008).

Transmitting knowledge about the local, regional, and international socialist, workers', and revolutionary struggles is something choir members take very seriously. I observe how they constantly try to ensure listeners fully understand their repertoire selection and recuperation strategies. Choir members see their primary task as acquiring knowledge about each song and searching for information about its origin and trajectories of local, regional, and international circulation. During the rehearsals I attend, I witness that they never decide to sing a song without learning about its history and background and researching and discussing its previous uses, even in the case of widely known songs. Tanja from Praksa explains this approach as a need to "demystify" the social and political roles of a song in order to recover its power: "When you know its previous usages, and you understand how the meaning is changing, you can more easily adapt it [a song] for the present and even change its 'register' to a certain extent."³⁰ Like other choir members, she is aware that acknowledging the past historical, cultural, and ideological contexts in which a song has been performed is crucial for what they call "responsible singing," something necessary for recuperating its "real" meaning, values, and ideas.

To achieve that goal, members occasionally ask me to help them obtain information about the songs, a request that I enthusiastically accept by suggesting some readings or contacting other people who could help them. During these exchanges, I observe that discussions about songs, although predominantly focused on lyrics, do not exclude the musical and performative aspects. I often hear that although the songs contain values and ideas they want to transmit to the listeners, the choir members cannot include

²⁹ These themes were removed from curricula in the 1990s and later reintroduced, though sparsely; see Trbovc Mihajlović and Trost Pavasovic 2013.

³⁰ Tanja, interview by the author, October 2, 2015, Pula.

them in the repertoire because their musical complexity is too demanding for amateurs. However, the most frequent debates that draw my attention are those over ethical concerns about singing the songs associated with contested political or affirmative actions.

One such debate is over the song “Mawtini,” an informal anthem and a symbol of anti-colonial struggles in Arab countries, also known as the pan-Arab “Internationale.”³¹ Newcomers from Syria and Iraq who joined Hor 29. Novembar suggest adding the song to the repertoire, which others enthusiastically accept, as suitable for supporting activities and protests within the Refugees Welcome agenda. However, since the song is also the Iraqi national anthem, members spend much time discussing its meaning and contemporary usage in the Arab world. Eventually, they agree that they do not have to be afraid of “appropriation” but to collectively stand behind their interpretation of the song’s meaning, expressed in the commentary they will always read before performing it.

Providing extensive political commentaries on the songs in the songbooks, during performances, and on choirs’ websites or social media platforms serves as a “manual” of the song’s meaning. This deliberate effort to shape the interpretational register and listeners’ reception prompts my curiosity during conversations with choir members. While divulging that she is not always comfortable with this, Jana explains that a vital aspect of the political recuperation of the historical repertoire lies in ensuring that listeners get a clear sense of their intentions. She continues, referring to “Mawtini,” “When I look back, it was a very good decision [to include it] because people are constantly asking for this song at protests, particularly people from the Middle East and refugees, who are empowered by and happy to hear it.” However, she also admits that making decisions about the repertoire, itself being the site of multifaceted contestation for silenced histories and painful memories, remains a continuous subject of the choir’s internal debates.³²

The Refusal of Nostalgia

The Kozara incident shows that the desired perception of songs depends not simply on the expressed intention but also on each performance’s contexts.

³¹ In English translation “My Homeland,” written by Palestinian poet Ibrahim Tuqan and Lebanese composer Mohammed Flayfel.

³² Jana, interview by the author, February 15, 2018, online. For the debates about repertoire selection see also the research done by choir member Ewa Moschitz (2021).

Although partisan songs are powerful devices in mediating the memory of the Yugoslav past, this role does not guarantee that their listening incites people to reject nationalism or capitalism. Moreover, official memory politics can co-opt and quickly deplete the songs' initial message and, therefore, political potential.

The fact that the same songs can circulate as a sonic marker both of resistance against nationalistic politics and of promoting "national ethos" forces choirs to navigate the songs' past and present political symbolism. The main stumbling block for choir members is the historical and contemporary appropriation of this repertoire by the political elites. In the past two decades, the official stance on the PLS has been gradually shifting from dismissal to incorporation into the national(ized) memorial landscape. Since 2008, the governments of post-Yugoslav countries have introduced new state holidays attached to the PLS that substitute the erased old socialist-era holidays. These new memorializations of the Yugoslav anti-fascist struggle fit into the "ethnicized" memorial landscape, detaching it from both its socialist and Yugoslav dimensions. For example, in the context of Serbia, Jelena Đureinović writes that officials did not frame the 2009 state celebration of the Liberation of Belgrade in World War II as a victory of Yugoslav partisans over fascism but focused exclusively on Serbs as the protagonists of the liberation (2020, 1–2). Vjeran Pavlaković similarly reports that in Croatia, from the mid-2000s on, the official regimes of memory have gradually begun to reclaim the importance of the Yugoslav anti-fascist resistance, yet only if it is cleansed of "the burden of communist ideology" (2012, 159).

As a reaction to the appropriation of the historical legacy of the PLS by the nation-states' memory politics, choirs organize alternative commemorations of important historical dates, usually as public singing interventions at neglected places of remembrance. They also participate in the alternative celebrations that emerged after the mid-2000s, organized by the new anti-fascist organizations and groups or restructured socialist-era associations of anti-fascist and partisan fighters.³³ These associations oppose the official

³³ Most of these organizations are the renamed and transformed previous organizations of partisan fighters, SUBNORs—Federal Associations of Fighters of the National Liberation War, founded after World War II. As SUBNORs largely stayed quiet during the Yugoslav Wars in the 1990s or even supported nationalistic politics (like in the case of Serbia, where the Serbian branch supported Slobodan Milošević), renewed organizations wanted to distance themselves from this problematic ideological transformation (Duda 2017; Filipović 2021). After 2000, they also started more freely organizing cultural and musical events as a reaction to the institutional lack of interest of preservation of the legacies of the PLS (see Hofman 2016; Hofman and Pogačar 2017).

memorialization of the PLS in an ethnic key and instead recall the shared Yugoslav, socialist, and anti-fascist legacy.

For instance, choirs regularly perform at Trnjanski kresovi (Trnjan Bonfires), an unofficial commemoration of May 8, the Day of Liberation of the city of Zagreb in World War II organized by the NGO Mreža antifašistkinja Zagreba (Network of Anti-fascist Women of Zagreb, MAZ). Since 2015, in the Trnje district on the banks of the Sava River, where the Yugoslav partisan units marched into Zagreb in 1945, people have gathered to take part in various cultural and artistic activities and attend workshops, exhibitions, theater performances, film projections, and concerts. Activist choirs' singing of well-known partisan, workers', and revolutionary pieces on the improvised stage usually closes the event and is enthusiastically rewarded by the audience.

In 2022, Praksa members went on a self-organized singing tour through Croatia and part of Bosnia and Herzegovina to visit some of the most significant monuments of the PLS (see Figure 4.5). Singing the most popular partisan songs, they aimed to remind people in the region about the importance of preserving the monuments as valuable places of remembrance.

Singing partisan songs to acknowledge the shared histories and Yugoslav socialist revolutionary strivings, however, does not neutralize their "ethnicized" usage at the state celebrations. This produces discomfort for choir members who struggle to find the right way to transmit the political meaning of the songs despite the co-optation. For example, Srđan, a conductor of Naša pjesma, told me that he hesitates to sing "Po šumama i



Figure 4.5 The poster announcing Praksa's singing tour "On the roads of the PLS with a song" (Pjesmom putevima NOB-a), 2022. Courtesy of the author Edna Strenja Jurcan.

gorama,” one of the most popular partisan songs. This Russian World War I and Civil War song is also known as “Partizanska” (The partisan’s song). It has many versions in various languages, including Greek, German, French, Hungarian, and Kurdish. During World War II, it was adopted by Yugoslav partisans due to a strong rhythm and powerful lyrics about partisans “who do not allow fascists to trample their lands” (*mi ne damo zemlje naše, da je gaze fašisti*). With its iconic status, the song was regularly performed at Yugoslav state commemorations but, during the 1990s, was co-opted at the congresses of the Socialist Party of Serbia (Socijalistička partija Srbije) and the Movement of Socialists (Pokret socijalista). Both political parties were associated with Milošević’s regime in the 1990s; though they declared a leftist orientation, they actually pursued a nationalist profile and politics. In the last decade, “Po šumama i gorama” has also become the soundtrack of several renewed state commemorations in Serbia, such as the abovementioned celebrations of the Liberation of Belgrade. In a 2017 celebration where the president of Russia, Vladimir Putin, was the most important guest, the whole concert of the Orchestra of the Army of Serbia was titled “Po šumama i gorama” after the song.³⁴ Due to this controversial sonic presence, at the center of Srđan’s anxiety is an inability to provide clear political and ideological meaning of the song to the listeners despite the choir’s detailed political commentaries.³⁵

Although the specificity of the Serbian context—in which the typical Right–Left division does not work and the parties often paradoxically position themselves on the political spectrum—complicates the recuperating of partisan songs, choirs share anxiety of co-optation of the songs by politicians. I hear them openly criticize political parties’ use of the songs at their celebrations and promotions, including the conformist adjustment by the left-oriented parties. For example, members of Hor 29. Novembar complain about the co-optation of the song “Die Arbeiter von Wien” (The Workers from Vienna)³⁶ by the Social Democratic Party that holds power in Vienna and participates in carrying out neoliberal policies against workers’ rights.

I also realize that choir members’ anxiety derives not only from the party appropriations of the historical repertoire but also from the very setting

³⁴ “Trgom republike oriće se ‘Po šumama i gorama’” (2017).

³⁵ Srđan does not overlook that “Po šumama i gorama” has a different status and meaning in the Croatian context. Interview by the author, August 14, 2018, Belgrade.

³⁶ For more about this song see Chapter 5.

of commemorative events. My close observation of the choirs' engagement with the alternative celebration of the Uprising Day in Croatia (Dan ustanka u Hrvatskoj, July 27) in the village of Srb, Croatia, reveals the deeper complexities behind this anxiety. The commemoration was revitalized by the Serbian National Council (Srpsko nacionalno vijeće), the Association of Anti-fascist Fighters and Anti-fascists of the Republic of Croatia (Savez antifašističkih boraca and antifašista Republike Hrvatske), and the Municipality of Gračac and supported by the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, making this event one of the most controversial public commemorations in Croatia.³⁷ Until the breakup of Yugoslavia, Uprising Day was a national holiday in the socialist republic of Croatia dedicated to the first organized resistance against Nazi occupation and the Independent State of Croatia in 1941. After 1991, this state holiday was abandoned and substituted by the new Anti-fascist Struggle Day, dedicated to the founding of the first ethnic Croatian partisan unit and celebrated on June 22. Uprising Day was dismissed as a relic of the allegedly oppressive official memory politics in which the communists had "monopolized" the Yugoslav partisan resistance.

In 2011, the renewal of Uprising Day started with a commemoration in the village of Srb alongside the restoration of a monument built in 1951,³⁸ which was destroyed in 1995 during the Yugoslav Wars. No longer a single event, it became a whole week of various activities, including an anti-fascist camp, co-organized by the Serbian National Council and the Network of Female Anti-fascists of Zagreb. The camp primarily involves young participants in the five-day program of meetings, discussions, workshops, trips, movie nights, and a workshop on singing partisan songs. The invitation to the camp declares:

You can expect days-long learning, socializing, and choral singing with local residents of Srb in Lika, in which the uprising against the occupiers and the Ustasha regime started on July 27. The camp ends with the celebration of Uprising Day with more than a thousand anti-fascists from all over Croatia, as well as Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia. We welcome

³⁷ Every year, members of the extreme-right Autochthonous-Croatian Party of Rights (Autohtona-Hrvatska stranka prava, A-HSP) try to prevent the organization of the commemoration because of its presumed Serbian communist profile by blocking the roads, camping at the commemorative site, or organizing a counter-commemoration that also includes playing songs by nationalist and pro-Ustasha singer Marko Perković Thompson on loudspeakers. See more at: "Subota 27.7. Srb, 12 sati: Dan ustanka naroda Hrvatske" (2019).

³⁸ The creator of the monument is sculptor Vanja Raduš.



Figure 4.6 Participants at the Anti-fascist Camp singing at the open market in Srb, 2018.

sympathizers and supporters, veterans, champions of their neighborhood and scholars, feminists, and all those concerned about the uncertain fate of the most significant achievements of our civilization—solidarity with the powerless, the fight for the other, and self-management. (“Poziv na Antifašistički kamp u Srbu,” 2019)

Since 2016, the members of *Praksa*, *Naša pjesma*, and *Le Zbor* regularly participate in the commemoration, usually by singing at the main celebration event. However, in 2018 and 2019, *Naša pjesma* members also led the singing workshop at the anti-fascist camp, organized in the form of daily rehearsals and public singing at selected locations in the village (Figure 4.6).³⁹ A vital part of the workshop is collectively writing the commentaries of the songs while discussing the concrete tactics for employing singing against historical revisionism and insisting on the PLS as a multiethnic, emancipatory, and revolutionary movement.

In our lengthy conversation after the 2019 commemoration and camp, Srđan is thrilled to use collective singing to actively engage people in discussions of the ideas and values of anti-fascism and socialism. However, he is less enthusiastic about the concert at the closing of the commemorative event. While he recognizes the importance of this renewed commemoration as a powerful statement of anti-nationalism and solidarity in the region, he

³⁹ See the performance at the village market: <https://vimeo.com/281513664> (Boban, Jadran, dir. 2018).

doubts the possibility of recuperating the political potential of partisan songs in the context of commemorative events. Primarily, he is disappointed about the low number of people who are engaging in the anti-fascist camp, political debates, or envisioning more concrete political actions since most people who attended the commemoration in Srb did so as a kind of excursion or holiday trip: “This is the same crew that visits Kumrovec⁴⁰ and practices commemorative tourism as part of recollecting about the ‘good old days,’” he complains. In his view, they came to their concert as passive listeners, which made them consume songs only as historical artifacts that evoke nostalgic feelings that, he said, are often manipulated by politicians.⁴¹

His comment makes me think about a more general stance I observe in choir members’ accounts: nostalgia harms the politically legitimate and proactive revitalization of the historical song repertoire. “We sing songs from the Spanish Civil War or the fight of the Yugoslav partisans against the Nazis not out of nostalgia but because they contain a message still valid for us today,” members of Hor 29. Novembar tell the Viennese Internet portal *meinbezirk.at* (Bazalka 2018). A similar statement opened the front page of Kombinat’s website: “We are not nostalgic; we sing and believe in values such as solidarity, dedication to the idea, and bravery.”⁴² I find that the reflection of Edna, the conductor of Praksa, may best summarize this uneasiness with nostalgia: “It is an ideological burden from the past from which members want to distance themselves.”⁴³

Indeed, nostalgia is one of the most persistent topics in public and scholarly deliberations on the socialist past. Simultaneously, it is one of the most contested categories that has continuously provoked debates and disagreements, which I will briefly describe here. The term “Yugonostalgia” was coined after the breakup of Yugoslavia to mark the emergence, shape, and implications of the positive memories of Yugoslav socialism. During the 1990s, it even became an insult to denigrate skeptics and people who did not or could not adjust to the post-socialist transformation and, therefore, were characterized as “old apparatchiks,” “suspected communists,” or even “traitors to the country.” Widely associated with irrational sentimentality,

⁴⁰ Kumrovec is the birthplace of Josip Broz Tito. In the last thirty years, it has been a site of commemoration on his birthday, May 25, which draws mainly older people. On Kumrovec, see Rubić and Petrović 2006.

⁴¹ Srdan, interview by the author, August 10, 2019, Belgrade.

⁴² In the current website the statement is removed yet it can be found in the press material of the choir.

⁴³ Edna, interview by the author, June 15, 2015, Pula.

melancholy, passivity, and the commodification of the socialist past for the Western gaze, Yugonostalgia exists as an ambiguous signifier of an affective attachment to the Yugoslav past.⁴⁴ In the last two decades, several scholars have criticized this emphasis on the commercial and passive aspects of Yugonostalgia, calling for an approach that appreciates nostalgia's complexity.⁴⁵ They argue for its utopian dimension as having valuable political potential to foster the "politics of hope" in the region (Palmberger 2008, 358; Luthar and Pušnik 2010, 19; Velikonja 2013a, 126–127). Some scholars also recognize the social and political relevance of Yugonostalgia not just in opposing nationalism but also in the current struggles for workers' and social rights and solidarity in the post-Yugoslav context,⁴⁶ while critics insist on the term's limited and even harmful impact on the political Left in the region (see Gilbert 2019; Breznik and Močnik 2022).

Contested discourses about Yugonostalgia strongly affect the strategies of choir members to regain the political relevance of partisan songs. Their insistence on listening to the historical repertoire beyond nostalgia signals a need to detach from the institutionalized setting of commemorative events and party politics. However, this detachment demands navigating the painful histories and memories, which profoundly inform choirs' singing (about) socialism.

Re-listening to the Socialist Past

To avoid having the loaded label "Yugonostalgia" attached to their activities, choir members see the importance of distinguishing between the PLS as "original context" and the later appropriations of partisan songs during Yugoslav socialism, when, as they put it, the "ideals" were replaced by state politics and the cult of personality. They do not pass up the opportunity to

⁴⁴ Post-socialist nostalgia or so-called red nostalgia is a broader phenomenon that has different shapes and consequences in different formerly state-socialist societies. For these specificities, scholars use terms such as "Soviet nostalgia" or the East German "Ostalgie" (see Berdahl 1999; Boyer 2006; Bošković 2013). For more general thoughts on post-socialist nostalgia, see Todorova and Gille 2010. Chiara Bonfiglioli observes that post-communist nostalgia exists not only in former socialist countries, but also in several Western countries, particularly those that have a strong anti-fascist movement and communist party (2011, 121).

⁴⁵ For the debates, see Jansen 2005; Velikonja 2009a, 2013b; Radojević 2009; Vjekoslav and Velikonja 2012; Petrov 2021; Popović 2021; Hofman and Petrović 2023.

⁴⁶ See Petrović 2012, 2013; Horvat and Štiks 2015; Hofman 2015a, 2015d; Hofman and Pogačar 2017; Popović 2021.

explain that the songs they choose to perform must not glorify the figure of Tito but address anti-fascism, self-management, and brotherhood and unity as the pillars of socialist Yugoslavia. “It’s not about glorifying Yugoslavia or Tito,” Jasmina says. “We deliberately do not sing songs about Tito. It is not about persons or systems but about the anti-fascism on which Yugoslavia was founded” (Rosandić 2014). The imperative is to include in the repertoire the songs choir members regard as “morally unblemished,” meaning including the pieces composed and performed in the conditions of struggle, rebellions, war, strikes, and revolution and excluding the songs written during the state-socialist period or at the request of party functionaries.

In elaborating on the logic behind this strategy, Teja from Kombinat gives the example of “Ogenj, jeklo, upanje” (Fire, steel, hope)—a song from the 1970s by the renowned composer Mojmir Sepe set to lyrics by Dušan Velkaverh for the Congress of the Association of Socialist Youth of Slovenia (Zveza socialistične mladine Slovenije)—whose main weakness, as she sees it, is that it was commissioned and “not created as a scream or a reaction to a specific social condition.”⁴⁷ She further clarifies that even when they tried, they could not find any post–World War II piece that could transmit the revolutionary fervor in its “original” expression. “I didn’t find any other song from 1950–1990. I don’t know one that would be appropriate for contemporary use, but I haven’t yet found any such song.” She articulates choir members’ need to distance themselves from the “high culture” and professionalized approach to these musical legacies.⁴⁸

Choirs opt for modest arrangements and promote simplicity in their performance style and setting. They prioritize clearly and effectively communicating songs’ messages, their “truth-telling potential” marked by “ideological purity” (*idejna usmerenost*) and their “thematic clarity” (*tematska određenost*). As Edna describes: “These songs are the most powerful, as they have wonderful lyrics—straightforward and pure. There is no metaphor, and that’s it.”⁴⁹ Choir members believe the full potential of their performance lies in a “more direct” transmission of the songs’ values and meanings that revives the “true spirit” of the partisan revolutionary struggle.

⁴⁷ Teja, interview by the author, March 28, 2013, Koper.

⁴⁸ For example, although Kombinat regularly performs alongside other partisan choirs that have traditions going way back to World War II or the Yugoslav era, members do not agree that Kombinat should be identified as the older choirs’ “offspring.”

⁴⁹ Edna, interview by the author, June 15, 2015, Pula.

“We inherited them [the songs] from our ancestors, and they should be preserved as they are,” says Živa.⁵⁰

However, she also admits that dedication to preserving partisan songs “close to the original” may stand in the way of a more proactive and innovative approach to this legacy. In our extensive exchange about these issues, she says that reworking the songs, intervening in both form and content—for example, by including changes in their melody or the rhythms, and more—can also be a strategy for adapting them for the present. She explains: “I think we could easily decide upon and sing songs in this original form but still add a contemporary tone. Why? Because I think that only when you rework a song by adding a sense of your contemporaneity can you really say why you actually choose a song. We weren’t daring enough to transform all our thoughts and reflections into our musical activities in a more provocative or focused way.”⁵¹ While choirs hesitate to adopt the main characteristics of the songs, adding an instrumental accompaniment such as a guitar, as in the case of Hor 29. Novembar, or a whole band (for Horkestar and Kombinat) ensures a fresh listening to the old repertoire.

Therefore, choir members have to constantly balance between ensuring the relevance of the historical repertoire, on the one hand, and keeping the songs simple enough for amateur collective singing, on the other. If they insist on the “original,” an ordinary listener unaware of the nuances could perceive the choirs’ performances as a simple restoration of the socialist-era repertoire. This perception can work against harnessing the political potential of the songs and shielding them against what they see as nostalgia—sentimental and passive engagement with the songs’ values and ideas.

While strategizing to promote re-listening to the partisan songs beyond the “official key,” choir members must accept that the legacies of the state-socialist project inevitably shape the reception of this repertoire. Moreover, this repertoire evokes ruptures and atrocities of the state’s violent dissolution, ethnic wars, and the post-socialist turmoil and exhaustion—deeply rooted in both singers’ and listeners’ personal and family memories. In other words, although choirs insist on a repertoire that will not elicit Yugonostalgia, they cannot deny that their performances often serve as an outlet for expressing the powerful feelings attached to socialist Yugoslavia and its violent dissolution. “People hugged us, talked to us all while we were singing,” says

⁵⁰ Živa, interview by the author, December 27, 2013, online.

⁵¹ Živa, interview by the author, December 27, 2013, online.

Teja, describing the physical contact she experienced with listeners during Kombinat's street performance in Belgrade in 2011.⁵²

At performances I attend, I observe audiences' emotional reactions and talk to them about their impressions. They often share that they could not suppress crying or the tingling feeling on their skin due to the intense emotional atmosphere. Being among those who felt overwhelmed, I could not agree more that we were experiencing the powerful sensory and bodily mobilization in an emergent sense of collectivity, which Edna describes by saying: "Because it is not that you just sing, and people sing . . . but these are powerful songs . . . people crying. . . . We sang 'Konjuh planinom' and a woman came and said that she could not express her feelings . . . and I think: this is it."⁵³ Such intimate and intense moments of collective expression recall what Martin Stokes defines as public intimacy through shared sentimentality (2010) when individuals do not feel isolated in their vulnerability but experience solidarity and community.⁵⁴

I also share the experience of singing partisan songs to reconnect, deal with, or reflect on the sedimented experience of our youth or childhood, giving it new meanings. While talking to Marko, a singer and guitarist in Hor 29. Novembar, we agree that singing enables us to face our personal attachments to the socialist past. However, for him, a child of Yugoslav migrants to Austria, discovering partisan songs is a way of reconnecting with lost family memories. Like his younger fellow choir members, he finds it transformative to learn about the songs in his mother tongue that carry the same message as the popular international leftist repertoire: "I had never heard 'Padaj silo.' I did not know about 'Konjuh planinom,' and I did not know that 'Hej brigade' even existed. I knew 'Bella Ciao' and other international pieces." The encounter with this repertoire has reshaped his left-oriented activist subjectivity: singing Yugoslav partisan songs, as a highly embodied and affective experience, has taught him about the history of the PLS, something he could not obtain through conventional education in the Austrian school system.⁵⁵

⁵² Teja, interview by the author, March 28, 2013, Koper.

⁵³ Edna, interview by the author, June 15, 2015, Pula.

⁵⁴ In his study of cultural intimacy in Turkish popular music, Stokes draws on Barthes to assert the importance of engaging with the social, political, and historical specificities of sentimentality as a new kind of social criticism (2010, 31). For more about sentimentality in the context of post-Yugoslav memory practices, see Hofman 2015d.

⁵⁵ Marko, interview by the author, January 9, 2020, Vienna.

To people like Marko, performing partisan songs provides access to the historical sensorium from which they felt detached. “When we sang ‘Konjuh planinom’ with Praksa in front of the monument to the Sisters Baković,⁵⁶ I completely broke down. I could not wait to finish playing the song on my guitar so I could walk away and start crying. I didn’t notice the audience reactions, but just felt the *actualité* of the moment, feeling that anti-fascism still lives as an emotional experience,” Marko recollects.⁵⁷

At this point, it is also important to note that embracing the messy feelings attached to the socialist past has significantly reshaped the choir members’ attitudes toward it. I observe how singing helps to embrace the Yugoslav historical experience in its complexity, including controversies, limits, and failures. For example, after a rehearsal in Vienna, Saša tells me that, over several years, he went through various phases—from nostalgia to irony and then a more sincere phase—but that some people go through the reverse process.⁵⁸

To ensure the political relevance of the historical repertoire, choir members must embrace that the lived experience of socialism greatly conditions people’s reception of the songs. Regardless of their attempts to separate a repertoire of revolution from the repertoire of the state, they have to maneuver with overlapping meanings of socialism as the state system “that returns, unbidden, involuntarily to haunt or unsettle or somehow mangle the present” (Scott 2014, 13).

To what extent does re-listening to a repertoire of revolution inform singing activism as an everyday activity of collective building in the realities of post-socialist privatization, dispossession, and exploitation, which have profoundly reconfigured the previous forms of communal social life?

⁵⁶ Students and anti-fascist activists whose home was a central hub for members of the illegal resistance at the beginning of World War II. They were brutally killed in 1941 by the Ustasha regime when they were twenty-one and twenty-four years old.

⁵⁷ Marko, interview by the author, January 9, 2020, Vienna.

⁵⁸ Saša, interview by the author, December 17, 2013, Vienna.

Strategic Amateurism and the Politics of Leisure

It is March 8, 2017. On Kongresni trg, one of Ljubljana's main squares, I join Z'borke at the protest celebration of International Women's Day in performing the song "Prekarni blues" (Precarious blues), an adaptation of Merle Travis's "16 Tons," first recorded in 1946 (see Figure 5.1). While the original lyrics illustrate a coal miner's life in the Kentucky mines, Z'borke's version, written by its conductor Pia, depicts the perspective of a precarious woman worker who not only works sixteen-hour days but avoids sexual relations so as not to get pregnant since she would have neither paid maternity leave nor access to an abortion. The lyrics refer to the benefits of state socialism, such as public pensions, free education, public health care, and social protections for employees, including a year of fully paid maternity leave, and meal and travel allowances. Nowadays, these have not only become unavailable to precarious workers but are also gradually vanishing from national employment regulations. The new version of the song replaces the original refrain—"You load sixteen tons, and what do you get? Another day older and deeper in debt!"—with: "You work sixteen hours, and what do you get? An empty wallet, no *burek*, and no time."

The lyrics further suggest that "not taking a vacation, not having a lunch break or a pension," which were previously forms of guaranteed state social protection, are now an individual's responsibility, "our problem." Referring to "no money" and "no time" as conditions of contemporary life, the song depicts an exploited subject whose struggle to satisfy basic human needs leaves no time for rest and leisure but ends in complete physical, mental, and emotional exhaustion: "From the stressful job you get sick with a month in a psychiatric ward, but you've got neither paid sick leave nor health insurance." After every verse, we repeatedly rally listeners, "I don't know who invented this world order. I don't accept it, people, let's resist!"¹ This rallying cry aims

¹ *Ne vem kdo si je zmislu ta svetovni red, ampak jaz ga ne priznam, folk, dejmo se upret!*



Figure 5.1 Z'borke performing at the protest celebration on March 8, Ljubljana, 2017. Courtesy of author Goran Jakovac.

to remind crowds about the necessity to fight for normal work hours, decent wages, and time for leisure and rest, all engendered by the neoliberal labor regimes.

The lyrics of “Prekarni blues” are autobiographical for many of us singing, and the song certainly resonates with the protest crowd, who supports us by clapping and nodding in agreement. It captures the overlapping exhaustions of the post-socialist life that often come to the fore during my conversations with choir members. After their performance in Ljubljana in 2015, Tanja, a member of Praksa, frames singing activism as crucial for her mental and emotional survival and for helping her to care for her children. Spending time with people who are “still prepared to fight against despair” helps her “to go on, to find some light, to find some ideals for the normal life you strive for,” she says. However, we both remain unconvinced by her enthusiasm, aware that our exhaustion cannot be cured simply by taking time for self-care amid the rapid loss of workers’ and social rights. After a short silence, she says with a trembling voice, “The world we knew has collapsed. It does not exist anymore. People are underpaid,

exploited, and tired.”² Her words resonate very strongly with me, as they fully capture the social transformation that neoliberal capitalism has brought about in the region.

* * *

In this chapter, I examine how the attempts to build a self-organized collective based on strategic amateurism are embedded in the condition of post-socialist privatization, which dismantled social ownership and the social relations based on it. By defending the remnants of the socialist cultural infrastructure, choir members reclaim the emancipatory potential of cultural activities that were once crucial to building a socialist society that would abolish class stratification. I show how singing activism cannot be quickly subsumed in the category of unpaid, affective, or socially reproductive labor, as such a focus would fail to recognize the complex post-socialist transformation in both waged and non-waged spheres of production. Instead, I build my argument around the socialist understanding of amateurism that pursues the often-unrecognized potential of leisure to resist the commodification of all spheres of life. Post-Yugoslav singing activism, I argue, brings a fresh perspective of the politics of leisure into the contemporary conversations about neoliberal exhaustion.

The Exhaustions of Post-Socialist Life

During our next meeting in autumn 2018, Tanja asserts that her pessimism about the successful struggle for the workers’ and social rights they sing about, unfortunately, has prevailed. She talks about her continuous efforts to fight long-term unemployment after obtaining a diploma in Croatian Studies and Pedagogy. A forty-three-year-old single mother of two children (ages eleven and fifteen), she lives in a small Istrian village fifteen kilometers from Pula, Croatia, and her recent jobs were temporary during the tourist season. She is waiting for “something stable” to appear, as do many other workers who have recently become part of the precarious, surplus labor pool, people who—in her words—have become “second-class citizens in their own town.” When I ask her to explain this expression to me, our conversation revolves

² Tanja, interview by the author, October 2, 2015, Pula.

around the city's new economic reality brought about by the privatization of industry, specifically the two big socialist factories in Pula, the Uljanik shipyard and the Arena textile factory.³

In 2012, the Croatian government passed a regulation to privatize Uljanik. Since then, this former symbol of the city of Pula and one of the five biggest shipyards in Croatia has been going through a so-called restructuring process. Caught in a frozen state of waiting for a potential owner or “privatization partner” to buy it, Uljanik's productive capacities have gradually diminished, with wage cuts and employee layoffs that led to continuous strikes and protests over several years.⁴ The “Battle for Uljanik,” as the media often referred to the protests, was a struggle not just to save local jobs but also to preserve a radically different vision of Pula's future economic, sociopolitical, and cultural development.

Praksa members actively joined the protests (see Figure 5.2). Their participation is not surprising since the choir first came together in 2014 at the protest against the privatization of the defunct Muzil military zone when they sang against introducing a new urban development plan that would allow tourist lobbies and tycoons to build hotels and commercial facilities.⁵ Since then, Praksa members have continuously supported Pula citizens' public actions against the complete economic, social, and cultural transformation, which Tanja frames as “the dissolution of the city” (*raspad grada*).⁶ She indicates that the economic trauma of privatization has affected not only the lives of people who lost their jobs and had to search for seasonal work in the tourist industry but also the city's overall social climate.⁷

In other words, a transformation in ownership and the modes of production not only has brought about economic instability and industrial ruin but

³ Tanja, interview by the author, October 10, 2018, online. Tanja even decided to dedicate her diploma research to the effects of Pula's industrial ruins as a social and cultural phenomenon (Tomić 2019). On the privatization of textile factories in the post-Yugoslav context, see Bonfiglioli 2019; Vodopivec 2021.

⁴ Uljanik operates today with minimal productive capacities due to its restructuring.

⁵ From the time of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the peninsula of Muzil has been a military zone closed to the public. During socialist Yugoslavia, it remained a defense zone. Muzil has not been used for these purposes since the dissolution of Yugoslavia but is still guarded by the Croatian military forces; the local governments have constantly fostered its privatization and transformation into a tourist attraction or resort.

⁶ Under the guise of “structural reforms,” the privatization agenda devastated many post-industrial cities in the region, as Gal Kirn asserts when analyzing the mass protests in the Slovenian town of Maribor in 2012–2013 (2018, 32–33). About the contested experiences of reintroducing the industry through private companies in the post-industrial Serbian city of Bor, see Jovanović 2018.

⁷ Tanja, interview by the author, October 10, 2018, online.



Figure 5.2 Praksa singing against the privatization of Uljanik, Pula, 2018.
Author Milivoj Mijošek, courtesy of Edna Strenja Jurcan.

has had profound consequences on social relations. Her account echoes that of the anthropologist Andrea Matošević, who writes how the new, emerging economy of the service industry, under the promise of transformation of Pula from a working-class city to a city of “wine, food, and pastoral sceneries,” imposed radical changes in life patterns (2019, 32).

Struggling to adjust to the city’s new economy, Tanja, like many other citizens of Pula, cannot find a job requiring working fewer than six days per week. During the summer, she works twelve hours a day, while available off-season jobs usually involve working weekends, which for Tanja, a single mother, is impossible. Her fellow-choir member, Ana, has left Pula in search of a better income or more stable employment. Tanja says she decided to join a band, as gigs on the Dalmatian Coast during the summer would afford her enough income to survive the winter. Other members of Praksa, although with more stable employment or retired, also feel deeply affected by the profound economic and social transformation. Tanja, however, distinguishes between “the old-school people” and “new generations,” saying that the former, who lived their productive lives during socialist Yugoslavia, obtained more stability, decent wages, and leisure time, things that the members of the younger generation cannot achieve so easily. “What was normal for our

retired members is a luxury for us. Yet, we must strive for that and sing about it,” she comments.⁸

Praksa members’ experiences encapsulate those of members of many other activist choirs. Though not all of them face unemployment or economic instability, they call for a critical stance toward the “economic reforms” following the breakup of Yugoslavia, which resulted in the radical transformation of labor patterns, including the extension of working hours, the precariousness and casualization of work, and under- and unemployment, all of which Ivan Rajković identifies as elements of the post-privatization economy (2018).⁹ Being, in fact, a privatization of the means of production, the post-socialist “transition” resulted in diminished social and workers’ rights, decreased unionization, and the general dissolution of the previously strong class solidarity.¹⁰ This shift also profoundly reshaped the categories of labor and leisure and, consequently, the relationship between the paid and unpaid fields of activity, demonstrating that privatization impacts more than industrial wage labor. As Praksa members’ accounts illustrate, people in the region experienced the overall change in the organization of social life based on the “8-8-8 model”: eight hours of work, eight hours of culture, and eight hours of rest. The epitome of the historical struggle for workers’ rights and the improved material conditions of life,¹¹ this model was also central to building Yugoslav socialist society, which promised a “decent” daily split of eight hours among workday, rest, and meaningful, cultured leisure.

Choir members often acknowledge the importance of this model. For example, after the March 8 protest described in the opening vignette, one of the members of Z’borke wrote to their internal mailing list: “While

⁸ Tanja, interview by the author, October 10, 2018, online.

⁹ Global North-centered approaches often neglect that precariousness and informal or temporary forms of labor have been defining life in the Global South for decades (see Millar 2014, 34; Mould 2018; Packman 2021, 8–9). In my research on music labor in socialist Yugoslavia, I show that precariousness was also an inherent part of socialist labor patterns when it came to labor in undefined or “gray areas” of the service and entertainment sectors, which included professional musician-ship (see Hofman 2015b).

¹⁰ In his ethnographic research on the privatization of Jugoremedija, a pharmaceutical company in Zrenjanin, Serbia, Valter Cvijić explores the condition of “labor weakness” as workers’ inability to engage in collective action, the ineffectiveness of strikes, a radical decrease in union membership, flexible forms of labor, and populist manipulation of the workers’ struggle. “Weakness,” he writes, “is not as much in confronting neoliberal reforms as in an inability of workers to affirm their social and political role as legitimate political actors, as they are currently objects rather than subjects of the neoliberal reforms” (2018, 54). Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams similarly explicate how an increase in short-term, flexible, or self-employment caused the “crisis of work,” in which, on a global scale, labor lost its political potential and mobilizing power (2015).

¹¹ The model was developed in 1817 by the English socialist Robert Owen and has become a key slogan in the fight for workers’ rights around the world.

work is economic survival, leisure is important for overall survival.” At the May Day protests that same year, while walking the streets of Belgrade, members of Naša pjesma and Hor 29. Novembar chanted songs that depict the fight for workers’ rights, such as “Die Arbeiter von Wien,” and held up banners reading, “I want time to rest” (*Hoću vreme za odmor*).¹² This song was probably written in 1927 when eighty-nine protesters were shot dead during the so-called July Revolt in Vienna. Fritz Brügel (1897–1955), a Viennese poet and essayist, wrote the song to the melody of the Soviet march “Belaya armiya, chyornyy baron” (White Army, Black Baron) also known as “Krasnaya armiya vsekh sil’ney” (The Red Army is the Strongest), composed by Samuel Jakovlevič Pokrass and Pavel Grigorievič Gorinstein in 1920 as a combat song for the Red Army. Brügel’s version was performed for the first time in 1929 at the Second International Workers’ Youth Day in Vienna. With its powerful lyrics about the resilience and struggle of workers who stand together in the fight against capitalist exploiters, the song also resounded at the 1934 protests of the Austrian workers’ movement against the fascist government and is still considered an iconic workers’ song.

Although I was unfortunately unable to participate in the protests, I know that the demand for rest has been increasingly present in the May Day protests in recent years. This request, however, carries additional significance for choir members. Apart from opposing the exploitation and poor working conditions visible in the prolongation of working hours, more rest time also implies a time necessary for leisure and cultural activities, singing activism included. Participating in and observing choirs’ activities affirms that the quest for free time beyond wage labor is crucial for choirs to persist as collectives. As an everyday activity, singing activism can be time-consuming, something I experience as a hindrance in keeping pace with the choir’s activities after joining Z’borke. After a few weeks of being a choir member, I realize that I cannot regularly attend the meetings, which I feel contradicts the aims of our self-organized endeavors. I often encounter a similar frustration when talking to other members, who echo my concerns about a lack of time to be as active in the choir as they would like. To calm my concerns and let me know that this is something activist choirs constantly deal with, Ljubomir from Hor 29. Novembar tells me that members “must also live from something.” He asserts that, under the current conditions, “engagement in culture

¹² See “Die ArbeiterInnen von BEČ!,” Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=10155388629824040>.

is always a kind of sacrifice,”¹³ which undoubtedly describes my frustration at being unable to attend rehearsals regularly and often having to limit my presence to performances.

Like me, some members leave the choirs because they cannot navigate between singing, family, and professional obligations. Matija tells me that, regardless of how much he wanted to continue singing in Horkestar, he could not give up other activist engagements in which he was involved: “I realized that I didn’t have time for anything else, and I left the choir.”¹⁴ For people with family, an engagement with “culture” is possible only if supported by their partners or relatives. Especially for single mothers, I witness how “sacrifice” also means relying on a network of friends, parents, and relatives who function as an “extended choir” made up of what they called “passive choir members” or people “behind the scenes.” As an unpaid leisure activity, singing in a choir is often possible for women only if they bring their children to rehearsals or involve them in the choir’s activities.¹⁵

For instance, the last time I met Tanja at the Festival of Alternative Choirs in Vienna in December 2019, she was with her thirteen-year-old son. As she later explains, this was the only way for her to travel and not take away from time spent with him.¹⁶ Her situation is hardly unique. Women frequently report difficulty juggling family obligations, job searching, full-time employment, and singing. Such experiences coexist uneasily with their accounts of singing as a much-needed collective leisure activity, a break from family and professional duties. For many mothers, singing creates a space where they can relax, “stealing” time for themselves. I also often observe how choirs serve as spaces where women can share common problems and look for solutions—by sharing children’s clothes and toys, jointly organizing birthdays and parties, or even offering financial support or help to search for a job. Membership in an activist choir gives them a sense of support and pleasure of socialization, as Lidija tells me, “Where we can invest time in something meaningful.”¹⁷

Her statement and other similar ones invite us to think about how the time beyond wage labor has been widely unavailable to most people and how

¹³ Ljubomir, interview by the author, January 10, 2014, Vienna.

¹⁴ Matija, interview by the author, August 16, 2018, Belgrade.

¹⁵ Kombinat choir even has a section of Kombinat children, who often sing at performances or even choose the repertoire for some occasions.

¹⁶ Tanja, interview by the author, November 1, 2021, online.

¹⁷ Lidija, interview by the author, June 28, 2018, online.

“culture” has either disappeared from the 8-8-8 hours model (being diminished to a labor/rest dichotomy)¹⁸ or remained available only to privileged groups. The post-privatization restructuring of the labor regimes simultaneously allowed for flexibility, letting some people organize their workday and adjust it to choirs’ activities. Although choir members’ economic backgrounds differ and many of them struggle to find stable, permanent employment, the majority of them, as I indicate in Chapter 2, do not belong to the category of “manual” or “essential” workers (e.g., blue-collar workers, taxi drivers, or medical staff) and do not struggle for basic survival. Most choir members are employed in the public sector or engage in short-term or temporary labor, predominantly as freelancers, such as copywriters, IT workers, designers, architects, or filmmakers. Those with permanent employment mostly work in education or social work, fields that often offer more flexible working hours. Having time and resources to “sacrifice” for cultured forms of leisure thus largely remains in the hands of people who are not hit the hardest by the consequences of the post-privatization economy.

In that sense, in contrast to the socialist culture model that served as a field of emancipation and striving toward a classless society through granting access to cultural activities to all working people, culture has predominantly become the sphere of people who can either dedicate time or pay for the (now) expensive private-led cultural activities. As I discussed in Chapter 1, the “economic reforms” based on privatization and dispossession entailed not only a lack of time beyond wage labor but also a devaluation and commodification of the activities that previously occupied leisure. As I will show in what follows, this adds a new conceptual angle that fosters strategic amateurism to rethink contemporary, exploitative, and consumerist forms of life.

Socialist Amateurism

Since the dissolution of Yugoslavia, the “democratization of culture” has meant simultaneously prioritizing the ethnic culture and promoting the figure of a “free” consumer of cultural products that would substitute

¹⁸ While in English, as well as in Slavic languages, the word “rest” can apply to leisure activities as well as to bodily necessities like sleep, bed rest for illness, and so on. I keep the distinctions between rest and leisure to indicate the existence of active time beyond wage labor.

the supposedly repressive socialist culture policies. According to Milena Dragičević Šešić and Milena Stefanović, culture theorists working on post-socialist culture in Serbia, this has resulted in a hybrid cultural model trapped between neoliberal capitalism and a “welfare state.” The state budget declaratively has supported the existing system of public cultural institutions. However, this system has been left at the mercy of capital flows and consequently struggles with the lack of funding, low budgets, and minimal employee salaries (2017). The vast infrastructure of culture houses, culture centers, and associations established to stimulate all working people to engage in cultural, artistic, and other activities¹⁹ has been privatized or abandoned. Both in terms of physical sites and the networks of societies of different scales and types, the resources that provided support for leisure activities in the cultural, educational, and artistic fields—from folk culture to experimental arts, including film, music, theater, radio, and visual art—have disappeared or dissolved (Praznik 2016, 110).

Amateurism played a prominent role in the sociopolitical transformation and building of the socialist society through working peoples’ active engagement in cultural activities, regardless of social background or level of education. Maybe the most illustrative example can be found in partisan testimonies. Uneducated people—mostly from rural areas, who became amateur musicians or conductors in the partisan units—acquired diplomas or master’s degrees in composition or conducting after the war. Narrating his experience, prominent composer Avdo Smailović asserts that he could not have obtained a university education without the radical transformation of social relations brought about by the socialist revolution (Tomašek 1982, 313). Reflecting on how amateur music activities profoundly shaped class consciousness during the PLS, musicologist Dragutin Cvetko writes, “All those who have talent or have been willing to learn basic musical skills, but who before the war were deprived of educational or performative opportunities, could develop and implement their talent during the war” (in Križnar 1992). The new socialist subject was thus construed as self-made—an amateur active in the field of cultural-artistic activities—since the socialist

¹⁹ The documents of the Committee for Ideological-Educational Work (Komisije za idejno-vaspitni rad) between 1957 and 1959 (“Materijali komisije za idejno vaspitni rad, 1957–1959”). Culture policy makers were eager to reestablish the cultural-educational societies (kulturno-prosvetna društva) or the cultural-artistic societies (kulturno-umetnička društva, KUD). For a study of the socialist cultural infrastructure in Slovenia, see Vrečko and Malešič 2021.

revolution not only “reshape[d] the internal structure of culture, but also revolutionized the position of the ‘cultural sphere’ in the social structure” (Močnik 2005).

In my earlier research on cultural life in rural areas (Hofman 2011a; 2011b), I write how amateurism provided a basis for the emancipation of working people and placed culture at the center of overall societal transformation toward abolishing a class-based society. For example, I extensively explore how, as part of a discourse of socialist modernization, cultural activities in Yugoslav villages had a strong self-organized and participatory dimension, as they were supported by a robust cultural infrastructure that aimed to foster active participation of marginalized social groups, such as women and ethnic minorities.²⁰ In the urban areas, complex facilities for education and cultural activities provided the basis for organizing workers’ time beyond wage labor in factories. In her research on Yugoslav industrial workers, Tanja Petrović asserts that this infrastructure enabled workers, who sometimes did not have an elementary education, to actively participate in choirs, folk music, singing and dancing, theater, photography, painting, and literature (2021, 64). Similarly, musicologist Roksanda Pejović (2006, 33) notes how numerous concerts “in factories, companies, government offices, army barracks, schools, hospitals, on holidays, in the honouring of important guests” created a flourishing musical life after World War II.

Amateurism thus built working people’s everyday lives on profoundly new foundations essential to creating new class relations. It promoted cultural expression that opposed the bourgeois art canon. Instead, it prioritized creativity and fostered the development of natural talents of all working people.²¹ As “a spontaneous collective expression and a basic necessity of each subject in the aspiration to be part of the wider social community” (Supek 1974, 8–9), amateurism derived from the need for some activities that are in reaction to working hours and work activities. In Supek’s view,

²⁰ The Marxist-Leninist notion of progress and improvement includes the entire society, economically as well as spiritually. In my research, I show how the “enlightenment of villagers” came about through the goal of educating the village population and developing the culture of rural areas after World War II (“Status žena u selima, materijali 1959–1962”). This also meant collaboration between the organizers of cultural presentations, people from local communities and writers, ethnologists, composers, journalists, and local authorities and party administrators (Hofman 2011b, 35–37).

²¹ The concept of “music of the working people” was used to distance it from both national and “high” culture as a part of a new cultural canon that relied on “natural artistic instinct without regard to the conventions of music theory” (Žganec 1962, 15).

cultural expression may compensate for work activities that have become mechanized, stereotypical, routinized, and a bit dull, making a person feel more fulfilled (1974, 15). This claim draws on Marx's thesis about free time that must not remain in the abstract antithesis to direct labor time. He writes: "Free time—which is both idle time and time for higher activity—has naturally transformed its possessor into a different subject, and he then enters into the direct production process as this different subject" (Marx 1953, 599).

In their recent studies, several scholars acknowledge how socialist Yugoslavia's unique mode of cultural production, based on amateurism, enabled rich cultural activities in the leisure sphere. Focusing on Yugoslav alternative culture (such as neo-avant-garde artistic practices in the 1960s and 1970s and the independent cultural and artistic scene in the 1980s), Aldo Milohnić grants amateurism a vital role in the emergence of the Yugoslav alternative arts scene. In contrast to the "professionalized" cultural elites of the time, amateurism made a space for artistic expressions beyond the established artistic canons. He uses the term "radical amateurism" for an "in-between space" beyond both official and commercial culture, which makes room for "alternative," experimental, critical, or unconventional artistic practices to flourish (2013). Art historian Katja Praznik, however, asserts that state funding of amateur cultural and artistic activities during socialism was insufficient and often uneven (2016, 113).

In the vibrant debates during socialism about self-management in culture, such failures and contradictions were often exposed and discussed. For example, from the 1960s on, groups and individuals who saw themselves as part of the "alternative cultural scene" claimed that cultural self-management remained largely declarative in practice (Kreft 1989; Dimitrijević 2016). They complained about favoring national cultural institutions, which received much more financial support than small, alternative cultural associations and societies.²² For example, cultural-artistic societies (KUDs) made the strongest network for amateur activities within the field of folk music and dance throughout former Yugoslavia.²³ KUDs were founded in

²² An additional challenge was dealing with discrepancies that emerged between the rhetoric of non-consumerist activities and consumer practices, which from the 1960s on, gradually began to overtake the state's care for leisure and the everyday needs of working people (Duda 2005).

²³ These networks were also strong before World War II, yet after establishing socialist Yugoslavia, KUDs cherished folk dance and music to promote brotherhood and unity. A topic addressed by several ethnomusicologists, see Ceribašić 2003; Njaradi 2018; Bajić Stojiljković 2019.

factories by workers' unions, youth associations, and other organizations (Dunin Ivancic and Visinski 1995, 8; Hofman 2010; Rakočević 2015). Since the state promoted such activities, KUDs represented one of the most widespread engagements with cultured leisure and were even a synonym for amateurism. Some Yugoslav intellectuals criticized such an emphasis on one type of cultural activity, arguing for the importance of a broader application of amateurism beyond a narrow "specialization of KUD expression" (Supek 1974, 12).

Regardless of the discrepancies between the official rhetoric and its application on the ground, the infrastructural expansion in the cultural field fostered new forms of self-managed organization and collaboration. After the dissolution of Yugoslavia, the socially owned culture infrastructure and previously non-monetized leisure activities disappeared or became commodities in the new economy. Katja Praznik shows how managerialism and entrepreneurial logic overtook every segment of cultural politics, including public institutions that considered cultural workers a cheap labor force (2016, 229–30).

For this reason, we cannot understand the strategic amateurism of activist choirs without considering the radical shift that neoliberal capitalism introduced into the cultural sphere. Through an engagement in the collective, unpaid, non-monetized activity, activist choirs help people navigate and resist the vulnerability and uncertainty of life structured by neoliberal exhaustion. However, I argue that singing activism is much more: it is a way forward to consider the ramifications of the loss of cultured leisure and to recuperate it—as a response to the privatized and deeply individualized consumerist forms of social life.

The Infrastructure for Cultured Leisure

Members of activist choirs see their singing as an alternative way of engaging in musical activities under neoliberal capitalism. They avoid paid or commercial engagements, such as singing at brand promotions or corporate events. Due to the overall dismissal of unpaid, non-commoditized leisure activities, choirs strive to subvert the idea of music as mere entertainment. As I extensively described in Chapter 2, during their singing interventions in the urban spaces, choirs regularly perform in shopping

malls, banks, commercial spots, and tourist sites, usually on “symbolic” dates related to World War II or socialist Yugoslavia. Members of Hor 29. Novembar often organize street performances on Valentine’s Day or Black Friday. By singing about socialist revolutionary struggles and workers’ rights, they aim to invite listeners to reflect on their role as passive consumers whose leisure time is thoroughly co-opted by capitalist spending mechanisms.

In reclaiming the importance of care for cultured leisure, choirs organize and support actions against the deterioration of the previously socially owned cultural infrastructure. In collaboration with other activist groups, they occupy or safeguard cultural institutions from loss of societal function, physical damage and ruin, and privatization. KULTUR BUNT, the action by Horkestar, was one such attempt. Members gathered on the morning of November 29, 2014, planning to visit several city spots to point to the ongoing problem of neglect of the public cultural institutions in Belgrade, Serbia. They started with a performance of “Pesma radu” (Work song) in front of the newly erected monument to the Russian emperor Nikolai II, carrying banners reading “freedom,” “fight,” “barking dogs—keep them on a leash” in their hands, as Figure 5.3 portrays.



Figure 5.3 Horkestar performing in front of the monument to the Russian emperor Nikolai II, Belgrade, 2014.

The song we all learned as schoolchildren in Yugoslavia starts with the line: “A song of comrades resounds, a song that celebrates work.”²⁴ Its authors are unknown, but it dates back to the October Revolution and is one of the most popular pieces of the pre–World War II workers’ choirs active during the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. This song became popular during the post–World War II period of “reconstruction and rebuilding” as one of the anthems of youth work actions (*omladinske radne akcije*) organized across Yugoslavia for rebuilding or setting up new transport infrastructure such as railways and highways, as well as material infrastructure for social and cultural organizations.²⁵

Horkestar’s members chose the new monument to point to the irony of national(istic) memory politics that, while simultaneously celebrating Serbo-Russian friendship, totally dismisses the existing World War II monuments and socialist memorial sites. Their singing intervention also criticizes the mantra of “foreign investment” as a euphemism for the murky privatization of cultural and historical sites that are abandoned and left to fall into ruin or removed entirely so that the land may later be sold as property. This agenda was already evident at the next stop, the National Museum of Serbia, which had been “under renovation” for years with no clear prospectus about when it would be open. To address the neglect of cultural institutions, they chose to perform an authored piece—by Jovan Ružić from the band Achtung-Dichtung and arranged by Jovana Backović (both associated choir members)—rather than the more usual historical repertoire. The song’s lyrics play with the local curse, *Jebem ti mater* (“Fuck your mother”), here modified into *Jedem ti malter* (“I eat your mortar”). In minimalistic form, the four verses repeat, “brick by brick, wall by wall,” while the refrain says, “I’m eating your house” and “I’m eating your mortar.” With these tropes that invite demolition and destruction, the lyrics metaphorically refer to the systemic ruin of the infrastructural developments and the absence of political will to invest in the public common good, sarcastically depicted in the last verse in the form of exclamation: “May your house collapse!” (*Neka ti se sruši kuća!*).

²⁴ *Drugarska se pesma ori, pesma koja slavi rad.*

²⁵ See the video of the performance at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ndwxml6oSFY> (Horkestar Hor, dir. 2014).

ciglu,	brick
ciglu po ciglu.	by brick by brick.
zid,	wall
zid po zid.	by wall.
jedem ti kuću	I'm eating your house
jedem ti kuću	I'm eating your house
ciglu,	brick
ciglu po ciglu.	by brick.
zid,	wall
zid po zid.	by wall.
jedem ti kuću	I'm eating your house
jedem ti kuću	I'm eating your house
jedem ti malter.	I'm eating your mortar.
jedem ti malter.	I'm eating your mortar.
jedem ti malter.	I'm eating your mortar.
jedem ti malter. . .	I'm eating your mortar. . .

A look at the video of this song from Horkestar's 2007 album adds a layer of meaning to it. As Prota explains, the location for shooting the video was one of the many inner courtyards within small, "poor" buildings in the heart of Belgrade that are being demolished so private investors can build exclusive new residences. The video portrays the choir members dressed as workers as they finally demolish the ruined buildings by breaking windows, doors, and walls with hammers and other construction tools. The accompanying electric guitars and bass add an energetic, funky rhythm that sonically support the visual display of such total demolition.

While listening to the song, it may not be clear what the pronoun "I" in the verses refers to. The video depicts the dual position of workers as the main political actors and "builders" of the socialist society, who were not solely victims of privatization but, as the video suggests, were also involved in the post-socialist dismantling. Transformed into consumers, they could not collectively organize in the capital-driven society.²⁶

²⁶ See the video at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vongRb-u-sE> (resho4, dir. 2007).

Due to its powerful message, mobilizing energy, and fast tempo, the choir often performs the song at many street actions, including ones that “occupy” public space. “Liberating the spaces with songs,” says Marija, the conductor of Horkestar, as she talks about choral singing as a tool to prevent privatization or to intervene in privatized spaces. One such action was the occupation of Belgrade’s Zvezda (Star) cinema. The occupation aimed to give the cinema back to the “hands of the people” after its privatization in 2007. Along with several other public theaters, Zvezda had been sold to a private owner who ended up in jail for financial fraud, ultimately leaving those formerly active cultural spaces abandoned and ruined.²⁷ As Marija poetically states in her media interview, when entering the space, they could sense “the smell of privatization that was spreading in all directions, the smell of the ruin of old film posters on the walls, binders, furniture, a pile of paper, bird feathers, fallen plaster, coffee cups that still had residue in them, projection maps, old computers with floppy disks still standing” (Jocić 2014). A few days later, when they had regained “the real cinema smell” back, one of the fellow activists in her interview shared the powerful message that this action carried, by saying: “The vulgar application of capitalism in our country has damaged our culture a lot because it treats it as a product and sets a price on it. And, I think we must grow things that have no price at all” (Komarčević 2014).

By defending the remnants of the socialist cultural infrastructure, choirs raise crucial questions about the cultural activities once constitutive of the emancipatory subject who fought against class divisions and private ownership. Publicly exposing the problem of ruination and privatization of former cultural venues, choir members call for the revaluation of the importance of amateur activities that, during socialism, encouraged people to take an active role in building new social relations. This emancipatory role resonates with Eric Drott’s claim that workers’ choral activities were historically connected to the struggle to socialize the means of production (2019, 10).²⁸ The post-Yugoslav singing activism thus calls us to reconsider leisure music activities and other types of engagement with culture through the perspective of political economy and class.

The increasing scholarly interest in the intersection between music and leisure (mainly from the perspective of music education) demonstrates

²⁷ See video from the occupation: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s7SyhioeWdM> (Okupacija Bioskopa, dir. 2014).

²⁸ Yet, he also portrays the contested status of collective singing in cultivating socialist sensibilities.

the need for rethinking the organizational framework and resources for nurturing a non-commodifying, democratized participation in music leisure activities. In her chapter in *The Oxford Handbook on Music Making and Leisure* (2017), Marie McCarthy sketches the development of music as an organized leisure activity at the US national level. Her revalorization of the work of Max Kaplan, an American musician and sociologist involved in leisure studies, points to a focus on communal music-making by the inclusion of all people regardless of age and social background (McCarthy 2017). Kaplan aimed to establish networks and institutions that should develop the musical activities in the lives of the masses as a way to fight against passive consumerism (McCarthy 2017, 16). These strivings were obviously shared across the socialist–capitalist nexus in the 1950 and 1960s.

In the socialist context, however, providing organized leisure activities for all people was part of the official policy and further points to the importance of an integrative approach. In the Western-capitalist conceptualization, amateur leisure music activities seek to lift up underprivileged individuals and communities within the existing system based on private ownership, class divisions, and capitalist modes of production, while socialist cultured leisure was integral in the overall transformation of that very system. In other words, the strategic amateurism of activist choirs recalls the social and political significance of communal leisure and the cultural infrastructure for the overall transformation of the material conditions of life.

If socialist amateurism was involved in the reshaping of relations in waged and non-waged spheres of production, how does recalling it intervene in a contemporary context informed by infrastructural decline and the loss of the relevance of collective organizing against class stratification?

Strategic Amateurism vs. Neoliberal “Self-Care”

Unemployed, Tanja has used her savings to finance travel for herself and her son to Malmö, Sweden, where Praksa has been invited to perform by the anti-fascist orchestra Motståndets Musik in 2019.²⁹ She probably would have decided otherwise if she had known that the Covid-19 pandemic would ruin the tourist season. Nevertheless, as she says in our last conversation in

²⁹ For more about the event, see: “Motståndets Musik möter Zbor Praksa,” Facebook, accessed October 10, 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/events/390058875256290/>.

November 2021, she did not regret it. Meeting people with the same attitudes about the importance of music as a form of activism indelibly energized her.³⁰

I often hear choir members praising the benefits of singing activism in fostering feelings of fulfillment by stimulating enjoyment and increasing energy. In our exchange, Lejla from Hor 29. Novembar talks about singing as “energizing,” even when she is totally exhausted from a long day. “Knowing that I have a rehearsal in the evening gives me new energy, particularly if those went well. Then you know it is worth going, and you are happy.”³¹ When I ask how this energy works, Marko similarly explains that his life, though already overwhelmed with too many professional and family obligations, would be much more stressful if he did not sing. What also becomes clear from his account is that singing is a remedy for the burden of labor, as it “lifts you up” (*diže te*) after a hard-working day, something he describes as: “Although it’s time-consuming, it makes life easier.” He further illustrates this with an example of a recent initiative to change the choir’s rehearsal day from Wednesday to Monday, which was immediately rejected by Hor 29. Novembar members. They all agreed that the middle of the week was the ideal time to recharge from the workweek that had already begun and to gather energy for the rest of it.³²

Choir members especially value the somatic act of singing, its emotional and affective potential being its most appealing feature. Some assert that the collective affective actualization of the songs’ revolutionary fervor works well to remedy exhaustion and social fragmentation as a dominant mode of life, even as a basic tool for everyday survival. Their accounts echo the enormous benefits of singing for one’s mental and physical well-being that literature on choral music widely notes. Empirical studies of the influence of collective singing on the psychobiological state of singers show how it increases endorphin, dopamine, and serotonin while decreasing salivary cortisol levels, a stress hormone that induces feelings of happiness and improves the overall immune system.³³ Qualitative explorations demonstrate that choral singing has multiple benefits for well-being (Livesey et al. 2012, 22), including several scholars working with amateur or community choirs around

³⁰ Tanja, interview by the author, November 1, 2021, online.

³¹ Lejla, interview by the author, January 16, 2014, Vienna.

³² Marko, interview by the author, January 9, 2020, Vienna.

³³ However, these studies also show that high-stress conditions (e.g., performances) may increase cortisol levels (Bullack et al. 2018, 2), which greatly depends on whether people are long-term or new choir members (2018, 8). The majority of studies are based on tradition of Western choral singing, however.

the world (Swijghuisen Reigersberg 2010; Bithell 2014, 5). Studying communal singing across cultural contexts, de Quadros writes about its benefits for “complete social well-being” (2019, 34). It helps people who experience medical conditions such as Parkinson’s disease, AIDS, or stroke, but also for different disadvantaged groups, such as homeless people, cancer patients, prisoners, migrants, refugees, and diasporic communities (2019, 41–42). In the context of LGBTQIA+ choirs, Thomas Hilder asserts that choirs offer a potential refuge beyond the wider trans-, bi-, and homophobic society and are “a model of care and healing for local LGBT+ people, especially those of us living with (visible or invisible) physical and/or mental health issues” (2020a). The studies more tentative to the sociopolitical context note that in an increasingly alienating world, singing fosters social bonds and improves social networks (Pearce, Launay, and Dunbar 2015). In her examination, Muriel Swijghuisen Reigersberg looks at the increasing interest in the field of music, health, and well-being as a result of the economic downturn, lack of investment in the public health system, and “the need for cost-effective approaches to improve well-being” (2017, 134).

My analysis intervenes in the discussion about the benefits of choral singing for well-being by insisting on the perspective of the political economy and capitalist mode of production. I agree that discourses of well-being and self-care can easily be co-opted by the neoliberal focus on an individual subject, her development, and fulfillment and, therefore, useless for wider collective struggles (Ward 2015). Moreover, the post-socialist experience plainly calls for a more critical approach to discourses of self-care, as it shows how they go hand in hand with the restoration of capitalism and the dissolution of the systemic care for workers’ rights, cultured leisure, and an emphasis on the emancipation of all social strata. The idea and practice of collective and emancipatory leisure have vanished from the political horizon, being delegitimized as a legacy of the repressive socialist state. Instead, the discourse of care as an individual endeavor and responsibility has stepped in, clearing the path for often professional and paid self-care as (often the only) solution to fighting social fragmentation and overall exhaustion.

The activities of activist choirs provide a critical response to such conditions. Choir members’ approach to amateurism directs attention to structural inequalities, alienation, and commodification inherent in capitalist modes of production. We should remember that singing activism is not solely a practice of giving voice to amateurs—musically untrained people—but a dynamic process of constantly renegotiating choir members’ positions

and subjectivities. In our conversation, Marko frames the flux between the trained and untrained as a “spectrum of amateurism” (*spektar amaterizma*). He refers to the fact that conductors, musicians, and some choir members do not easily fall into the amateur category because they obtain a musical education and occasionally earn from performing or working as full-time music teachers.³⁴ In that sense, strategic amateurism exposes the inequalities and challenges in accessing formal music education, cultural activities, and any non-commodified forms of leisure, in short, in practicing cultured leisure.

Free and done for love and not financial reward, in the words of one member, singing activism is “one of these things without a price.” However, choir members emphasize that it is not simply a “love for singing” that attracted them to activist choirs: “It is not a typical choir. Oh no, it’s not. We do not gather (only) because of the love of choral singing or because of a school, a neighborhood community, a retirement home, or a church, and we don’t have extra time to kill with a hobby. The choir is special, social, and its own,” say the members of Le Zbor in one of their interviews (Borković 2018). This statement illustrates that singing in an activist choir should not be misunderstood as a recreational activity aimed solely at relaxation. Instead, what entices people to join the choir and motivates them to keep singing are the shared strivings to engage with the sociopolitical reality, where improving the quality of their personal lives is a side effect and not the primary goal of choral singing. While it is pleasant and contributes to choristers’ well-being,³⁵ singing activism reclaims the category of amateur that fully embraces the everyday struggles and the material conditions of life after Yugoslavia.

“Leisure should not be confused with idleness, as many of the things we enjoy most involve immense amounts of effort,” Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams write while recently proposing that we should all be free to practice activities such as learning a musical instrument, reading, engaging in sports, or socializing with friends (2015, 85). Some decades before, in the 1970s, Robert A. Stebbins, a sociologist devoted to developing leisure studies, proposed the concept of “serious leisure,” used to define amateur artistic activities done with dedication and commitment (1977, 582). He divided casual leisure, primarily reserved for social interactions and fun, and serious

³⁴ Marko, interview by the author, January 9, 2020, Vienna.

³⁵ The concept of radical care that is recently promulgated as an alternative to discourses of self-care and well-being also presupposes care as a political move; see Hobart and Kneese 2020.

leisure that requires effort. Amateurs involved in the former pursue the activities they do not make a living from with the highest dedication (often to the same extent as professionals or sometimes even more), which, he argues, makes them the “marginal men of leisure” (1977, 598). His thesis about serious leisure recalls the idea of an amateur as an individual, often also a peculiar person who is so passionate about her interests that her close and wider social environment marginalizes her (1977, 599). Consequently, “serious leisure” is overwhelming, contagious, or even irrational as, if not controlled or adequately rewarded (as in the case of professionals to whom such dedication is part of the job), such passion goes beyond the accepted norms. In other words, in capitalist modes of production, a “serious” investment in leisure time is either opacity or a privilege. In contrast, socialist amateurism questions the distinction between leisure as relaxation and entertainment, on the one hand, and active and serious, on the other, the former being reserved only for the peculiar, skilled, or dedicated.

In Chapter 3, I showed how strategic amateurism, although not free from the pressures of vocal quality, challenges the neoliberal mantras of “self-assessment” and “self-improvement” that offer no space for articulating failure, incapacity, or lack. I often hear how members precisely admire the lack of expectation regarding talent or education that makes relations within the collective deeper. Commenting on this from a class perspective, Marko tells me that in a society where “we are all guilty for what we can or cannot do,” strategically playing with the position of an amateur implies challenging given inequalities based on talent, education, or socioeconomic background. He indicates that in capitalism, everything is an individual responsibility—“as you are guilty if born poor”—which reduces any sociopolitical fight to an individual’s struggle. Instead of focusing on accomplishments and failures as an individual’s responsibility, an approach based on amateurism assumes “a collective playing with success and failure as an essential aspect of living in solidarity,” as Marko puts it.³⁶

After the Le Zbor’s performance at Trg je naš (The square is ours), the protest against the announcement of the decision to rename Trg maršala Tita (Marshal Tito Square)³⁷ in Zagreb (see Figure 5.4), one political

³⁶ Marko, interview by the author, January 9, 2020, Vienna. About the different meanings of solidarity in the contemporary world, with a view from Mexico City’s punk collectives, see Tatrot 2022, 120.

³⁷ The authorities eventually renamed it Republic of Croatia Square.



Figure 5.4 Le Zbor performing at the protest on Marshal Tito Square, Zagreb, 2017. Author HINA. Courtesy of Julijana Lešić and the Le Zbor archive.

analyst criticized the quality of their performance, expressing concern about whether they rehearse at all and pay attention to their vocal quality. In response to his comment, choir members say they cannot take such criticism seriously, as it does not recognize the primary purpose of an activist choir made up of women who, “in addition to the choir and protests, also have their own jobs.” They emphasize that choir members are ordinary people who have their own responsibilities and do all the work of the choir by themselves: “It often happens that the organizers of the meeting call only a few days before the action or protest and that we have very little time to practice the song, we come to the protest straight from work, sometimes half-sick or hoarse, almost always tired, as much from work as from the fact that in 2018 we still have to protest for or against some things” (Borković 2018). Le Zbor members responded by explaining that singing activism is not solely an artistic practice detached from everyday life struggles and exposed the existential aspects behind “unpolished” or “bad-quality” singing.

In the same register, members of other choirs question sociability through singing activism as simply an “outlet” for healing the consequences of a precarious life outside the waged sphere. Shaped by tensions and failures, they describe singing activism as equally exhausting and draining as “uplifting.”

Svea reflects on this by saying that Le Zbor can serve as both a protection against burnout and a cause of it, which depends heavily on the intensity of the choir's activities, the sociopolitical moment, and the life phase and mental and physical state of each member. During periods of more frequent performances, members often end up exhausted. "It eats you in an instant," Svea recalls the preparations for the third festival of activist choirs in 2018. She continues, saying that after such demanding periods, people often take time away from the choir to recharge their batteries and eliminate "negative energy."³⁸

Similarly, Tanja explains that as a member of an activist choir, one reacts to societal problems and intervenes in sociopolitical reality, which is why one inevitably goes through periods "when you have doubts and lose the drive and ones when you regain it." Crucial to this process, however, is to persist or, in her words, "being in shape" (*kondicija*). As she frames it, being in shape is a collective effort, so members are particularly careful to nurture close mutual relationships.³⁹ "There are so many things in this society that work against this type of deep relationship," Svea tells me. In her opinion, due to long-term social and economic deprivation, social ties are not just fragmented and broken but also burdened by cruelty, roughness, and cynicism.⁴⁰

With these reflections in mind, instead of emphasizing self-care as an individualized responsibility for personal well-being, singing activism invites us to think about the irony of demands for self-care from exploited and exhausted subjects. To recall the lyrics of "Prekarni blues," "from the stressful job you get sick with a month in a psychiatric ward, but you've got neither paid sick leave nor health insurance," capitalist exploitation leaves no time for rest and leisure. Instead, we are left in a state of complete financial, physical, and emotional exhaustion.

With my take on strategic amateurism, I engage in the contemporary debates about "taking back leisure." Although present in Marxist thought, the focus on leisure has lately gained particular attention from authors who claim that, under capitalism, jobs are not only a source of income but are also pivotal to our social lives and sense of self. To name a few, searching for "a project that would overturn existing ideas about the necessity and desirability of work," Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams (2015, 125) propose

³⁸ Svea, interview by the author, April 3, 2018, Zagreb.

³⁹ Tanja, interview by the author, November 1, 2021, online.

⁴⁰ Svea, interview by the author, April 3, 2018, Zagreb.

nurturing a meaningful life beyond work as an alternative to the neoliberal production of subjectivity.⁴¹ At the center of their proposal is contesting the post-Fordist privileging of labor and instead promulgating the post-work imaginaries. The most significant move would be reintroducing leisure as a valuable concept to understand and fight the neoliberal production of subjectivities. Similarly, Kathi Weeks searches for a conceptual framework that can embrace forms of social cooperation that are “less readily transformed into new forms of work and thus less easily recuperated within the present terms of the work society” (2011, 29). More explicit in that sense is Maurizio Lazzarato’s claim that all human beings should be artists as a challenge to capitalist accumulation, which is no longer based on the exploitation of labor but on the exploitation of knowledge, life, health, leisure, and culture (2004, 187).

However, what we can learn from the socialist experience is that the field of leisure is reserved neither for “less demanding or less important activities,” where people rest in order to increase productivity, nor to refuse their productive selves. To return to Marx, leisure is not simply an outlet for the burden of productive time, a possible compensation for lack of freedom in production relations. It is essential for expressing and expanding creative capacities that transform both the waged and non-waged spheres of life (Marx 1953, 599). Leisure cannot be separated from labor, as both are necessary for emancipation of people and transformation of the society in the struggle against capitalist exploitation and commodification.

Instead of simply searching for the social and political value of leisure as opposed to labor, the legacies of historical socialism bring to the fore an integrative approach. Such a perspective privileges cultured leisure as the site of challenging the capitalist social relations in both the waged and unwaged spheres of production. As Vladimir Kolarić and Vuk Vukićević write in their recent essay on Yugoslav culture self-management, culture was integrative in building new social relations and institutional structures, transforming society, relations of production, and human life as a whole (2018, 1232). I argue that an emphasis on cultured leisure reminds us of the necessity of systemic care of both labor and leisure beyond surplus value, which resonates far beyond this particular region and is relevant for a nuanced understanding of contemporary efforts to combat neoliberal exhaustion.

⁴¹ On Judith Butler’s notion of a “livable life” and its affective, ethical, and political dispositions, see *Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, 2018.

Activist choirs offer an alternative infrastructure for cultured leisure, building the capacity for collective becoming under the conditions of post-privatization and the overall commodification of life. Their strategic amateurism invites us to face neoliberal capitalism's shortcomings in ensuring basic human needs, including secure, decent wage labor, and meaningful leisure and rest, which encompasses care for self and (with) others.

Socialism Reimagined for Now

“Bella ciao, bella ciao, bella ciao, ciao, ciao” resounds on a fully packed Prešernov trg (Prešeren Square) in Ljubljana, where protesters have gathered on the summer afternoon of June 24, 2020. Kombinat leads the song from the church’s doorsteps. Meanwhile, protesters sing along, carrying banners reading “Anti-fascism is a necessity” (*Antifašizem je nujnost*), surrounded by anarchists and Antifa flags.¹ Although surgical masks to prevent the spread of Covid-19 muffle the sound coming out of some of the protesters’ mouths, the proximity of human bodies after the long period of isolation makes the experience of listening to the song more emotionally charged.

As many times before, the protesters have gathered this Friday to express disagreement with the politics of the right-wing government of Janez Janša—the very political figure who was in power during the 2012–2013 mass protests I discussed at the beginning of the book. However, this Friday happens also to be Statehood Day, a state holiday dedicated to the celebration of Slovenian independence from Yugoslavia, gained in 1991, which makes the protest an alternative commemoration and a direct response to the government’s official event organized just 500 meters away at Kongresni trg (Congress Square). Because of the “Friday protests” that have been ongoing for several months, the government representatives have “secured” the commemorative site from the protesters’ potential disruption by wiring the square with fences and positioning the police defense in full combat gear. Expectedly, this triggers rage among the protesters at Prešernov trg, who accuse the government of repression and fascism. For them, this unprecedented act recalls the historical moment of the beginning of World War II, when wire fencing surrounded Nazi-occupied Ljubljana. By singing the anti-fascist anthem, as “Bella Ciao” is often called, they respond to what they believe is the government’s turn to authoritarianism that started with

¹ See videos of the singing at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Q4IbkDSw_4 (Matoz, Zdenko, dir. 2020) and at: <https://twitter.com/juretrampus/status/1275842272450535427> (Jure Trampuš [@juretrampus]. 2020).

the outburst of the Covid-19 pandemic. The day after the protest, the collective Aktiv delavk in delavcev v kulturi, a working group of cultural workers, writes in its statement that Slovenian society has experienced a further turn to fascism that already started by “restoring excess capitalism, looting social property, the erasure of part of the population,² and establishing an untouchable political class and its offspring” (Musić 2020).

It was not the first time that Kombinat had sung “Bella Ciao” at the protests. This song has been a regular soundtrack of numerous similar events, festivals, concerts, open rehearsals, and street interventions in the last decade. When speaking about this piece, choir members never miss an opportunity to emphasize that they pay homage to the original “workers’ version” of the song, the version that the choir Mondine (Il Coro delle Mondine di Novi di Modena) sings. This famous Italian female choir from Novi in the Emilia Romagna region comprises the daughters and granddaughters of late nineteenth-century to early twentieth-century Po Valley rice paddy workers. They perform the version that is often considered a precursor to the most popular Italian partisan song during World War II, a melancholic ballad about the heroic death of a partisan.³ This version of “Bella Ciao” tells the story of the cruel working conditions among women rice paddy workers who stood in cold water for hours “among insects and mosquitoes,” often tortured by capitalist masters. In their rendition, Kombinat members draw on Mondine’s “original” performance style while maintaining the lyrics of the well-known “partisan version.” Thus, they sing the first two verses a cappella in a canon-like style at a slower tempo to gradually accelerate the pace in the faster second part, accompanied by an ensemble of accordion, guitar, and bass.⁴

Kombinat’s performance of “Bella Ciao” gained much attention. The YouTube video of their 2013 concert performance has more than four million views and has been shared on various online platforms.⁵ A quick look

² Referring to the unlawful erasure of 25,671 people from the Register of Permanent Residents of the Republic of Slovenia in 1992. Most of them were born in other republics of socialist Yugoslavia, and they thus lost their legal residence status and, consequently, also economic, social, and health rights. For more about the erasure, see Kogovšek and Petković 2010.

³ The Italian partisans formed the resistance movement (Resistenza) that fought against the German army and the army of Mussolini’s reconstituted fascist regime in northern Italy from 1943 to 1945. For more on the musical legacy of the Resistenza italiana, see Spinetti 2021.

⁴ Kombinat also organized a joint concert with Mondine in 2010 titled *O, Bella Ciao—A Female Resistance Song Today* in the Autonomous Factory Rog. See the video of the informal singing of Mondine and Kombinat at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uhJgAT0evSs> (Natalija, dir. 2010).

⁵ See the video at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e3v4V9i9d5Y> (Luksuz produkcija, dir. 2013).

at the video shows hundreds of comments in more than twenty languages, most praising the choir's excellent performance and the song's powerful message and catchy melody. Within the comments, we also find an exchange that turns into a heated debate about the "origins" of the song when one of the commentators claims that "Bella Ciao" originated as the theme song of the popular Netflix series *La casa de papel* (*Money Heist*). Others criticize such a statement, complaining about a complete lack of knowledge about the song's history. Those commentators insist on conveying the origins of "Bella Ciao" as the song of early twentieth-century Italian rice paddy workers.

The debate seems to reflect a generational difference, with older people shuddering over what they perceive as younger people's lack of knowledge of history. However, the clash is also driven by the controversial transnational circulations of "Bella Ciao." The song's global popularity from Paris to Kurdistan and New Delhi to Baghdad and the United States has not ceased over the years, with many musicians making covers of it, such as the French chansonnier Yves Montand (1960s), the Turkish band Grup Yorum (1989), and, more recently, Marc Ribot and Tom Waits for the 2018 album *Songs of Resistance 1942–2018*. In the Yugoslav region, it is known as a partisan song, which acquired new meanings during late socialism and after the breakup of Yugoslavia. Several popular music covers sustained the song's subversive ethos, including the one by the punk band KUD Idijoti from Rijeka, Croatia, who recorded the song in 1993 to explicitly express disagreement with ethnonationalism and the Yugoslav ethnic wars.

Apart from popular music covers and its endurance at protests, including its most recent sonic presence during the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic, when the balcony chanting in Italy went viral,⁶ "Bella Ciao" has also been recently heard in the chants of football fans, on TV shows, and on dance floors. From the mid-2000s on, the Balkan music star Goran Bregović has performed a brass band "party" cover, and clubbers around the world have been thrilled by the remixed version by the French pop star Maître Gims as well as by the 2018 electronic dance music version by Steve Aoki and Marnik (made in collaboration with Netflix and the *La casa de papel* series), both of which became summer hits.⁷

The global popularity of "Bella Ciao" exposes its contemporary commodification and co-optation of what commentators of Kombinat's video

⁶ See video at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EfAEYxXbw04> (Farhan Anwar, dir. 2020).

⁷ For other examples of the global circulation of "Bella Ciao," see Spinetti, Schoop, and Hofman 2021. For the most recent study of the song's genealogy, see Bermani 2020.

also point out. Some of them complain about the paradox of spreading the message of resistance through a global commercial platform like Netflix, a symbol of mass consumption. Others oppose this comment by saying that the use of the song for commercial purposes does not necessarily diminish its political meaning, as the person under the nickname Olivia Alba Alba writes in Spanish: “In my humble opinion, taking it out of context and even modernizing it is a way for new generations to learn about the past. . . . I meet young people who fell in love with ‘Bella Ciao’ through *La casa de papel*. I motivated them to seek more information about it, and now they look for more information about fascism, Nazism, etc.” According to the number of likes, many support her opinion that one could hardly deny: the ability of “Bella Ciao” to trigger powerful feelings and to mobilize people to fight against injustice of all kinds, generating hope, as it did on Prešernov trg.

* * *

After focusing on strategic amateurism as a way of politicizing leisure, in this final chapter, I turn to the broader question of how we can reclaim socialism as a relevant political platform today. In Chapter 3 I showed how, when transmitting the desired meaning of the songs to ensure their effective political deployment, choir members navigate “the burden” of the memories of socialist Yugoslavia and its traumatic dissolution. In selecting the repertoire and planning their activities, choirs tend to distance themselves from both the uncritical glorification of Yugoslav socialism and its wholesale rejection, recognizing the value of its present social and political legacies while also seeing its failures. Deepening the conversation on the complex coexistence between the lived and the imagined, here I further explore how choir members emphasize the global entanglement of the song repertoire infused by revolutionary struggles and social and political movements, both historical and contemporary. I observe how this focus tends to sustain the political legacies of socialism in the present beyond what the choir members see as a systemic draining of “true” socialist ideas and values.

In the chapter’s last two sections, I concentrate on the anxieties surrounding singing activism’s efficacy in contributing to the political struggles on the ground. The choirs’ strategic amateurism often remains unrecognized or disregarded as an “aestheticization” of politics, of which choir members are aware. I argue that in this moment of neoliberal exhaustion and the extreme scarcity to act politically—a scarcity that permeates the global

contemporary sociopolitical realm—the persistence to collective organization through singing has to be taken seriously. The political capacity of singing activism exists at the intersection between bare survival and action, activity and passivity, possibility and impossibility. I ask: to what extent is embracing singing (about) socialism itself a hopeful, life-sustaining move, even if it does not always conform to expectations and liberal notions of social change? What does it reveal about the necessary foundations of a future anti-capitalist project?

Anti-fascism Now

In a two-page interview in the regional newspaper, Edna states that members of Praksa declared themselves “anti-fascists” to avoid any identification with Yugonostalgia or the communist regime: “We are anti-fascist. And we sing *anti-fascist songs*. Not only from World War II and Yugoslavia but also from different periods and contexts—Italian and French workers’ songs, songs from the Spanish Civil War” (Angeleski 2019). I am not surprised that she defines choir repertoires and activities within the framework of anti-fascism. In fact, Edna’s statement repeats what I heard five years earlier in the conversation with Teja from Kombinat: “We sing anti-fascist songs, and these are not solely our local phenomenon. We sing revolutionary songs from Chile, France, Italy, and around the world. The songs of Slovenian partisans and the songs of French partisans are practically the same. The concept is the same; all of them fight for freedom.”⁸ As an example, she names “Na oknu glej obrazek bled,” originally the Asturian anti-fascist song “Dime dónde vas, Morena,” which fighters who had joined the Republicans in the Spanish Civil War brought to Slovenia in the late 1930s. During the PLS, the song got new lyrics about a girl longing for her boyfriend after he joined the partisans, written by Mitja Ribičič, a Slovenian partisan fighter, poet, and later Yugoslav politician of the highest rank.⁹ In Slovenia, this version became one of the

⁸ Teja, interview by the author, March 28, 2013, Koper.

⁹ In the Slovenian version of “Dime dónde vas, Morena” (Tell me where you’re going, black-haired one) the title translates as “In the window, see [her] pale face.” In translating the word *morena*, which refers to a Latina girl with brown or black skin or a person of mixed race, the author opted for “pale face” (*obrazek bled*), which can evoke racialized connotations. However, it can also be that the author adjusted the lyrics to the context of the predominantly white population of Slovenia and that “paleness” has no overt racial connotations but characterizes the worried face of a girl longing for her boyfriend.

most popular partisan songs and one of the first songs Kombinat members included in their repertoire.

The way choir members describe the geographical and historical breadth of the repertoire confirms their commitment to framing it as inherently infused by global entanglements, circulations, and remediations. For example, in one of their first media interviews, Kombinat members poetically describe the songs they perform as “floating objects” that have their own “lives” in different times and locations (Matoz 2008). When I discuss this with the members, they explain how it is necessary to show that the repertoire is not only attached to the PLS and Yugoslav context but also to various historical and contemporary struggles for humanity, equality, dignity, and freedom. This strategy allows listening to the historical repertoire as dynamic and adaptable, as something that resounds in the present.

During my engagement with the choirs, I become aware that embracing anti-fascism is an efficient way to recuperate the songs here and now. Its symbolic framework connects the historical and contemporary moments, which, as Živa says in our conversation, is essential for mediating the values and ideas of the old songs to the younger generations. She claims that emphasizing the contemporary relevance of the old songs—through appropriate contextualization and presentation—brings them closer to young people born after the dissolution of Yugoslavia and helps “raise new partisans of today.” She continues: “We constantly emphasize that these songs are relevant today, and we sing the ones that refer to the present.”¹⁰ Such attempts often resonate with the audience in the right way as, writing about Kombinat’s performances, the Slovenian journalist Ervin Hladnik Milharčič notes, “I experience these songs as songs of resistance, not as partisan songs. I have the impression that these are songs of my time” (2011).

The choir members’ attempts to reclaim the contemporary relevance of the legacy of the PLS is not an isolated case. Instead, it reflects the more general tendencies in the region. In the last decade, post-Yugoslav activists, artists, and intellectuals (mainly from the new Yugoslav progressive Left) have often discussed what is the right strategy to politicize the ideas and values of the Yugoslav revolutionary struggle. Being partly involved in these discussions, I observe firsthand the intensive exchange about which type of engagement with the PLS is effective and how to deal with its ambiguous status in the political arena in the region. At the center of a vivid debate is

¹⁰ Živa, interview by the author, December 27, 2013, online.

the distinction between the historical experience of PLS (Gačević 2019) and contemporary anti-fascism. For example, in the short text “Šta je nama naša borba dala” (What has our struggle given us?), which takes its title from a verse of a partisan song,¹¹ Marina Veličković presents an array of restraints that saturate the contemporary relevance and political potential of what she calls “the historical anti-fascism.” In her view, what prevents it from being fully politicized to be “ours again” is its attachment to the “controversial historical past and mediated by family memories” (2016).

Similarly, in searching for an approach adjusted to the present, the primary question among the choirs revolves around whether and how to detach from the predefined meanings. Svea from Le Zbor, for example, argues for the necessity to move from the historical events that happened eighty years ago toward what she calls the “anti-fascism of the twenty-first century.” In her view, opting for a global framework of contemporary anti-fascism allows them to deal more easily with contested and painful histories, which is the precondition for envisioning new models of struggle.¹² Nataša expresses the same opinion in a media report about Kombinat: “Younger people want to sing these songs unburdened of certain historical notions and without any prejudices” (Matoz 2009). In our conversation, Svea nevertheless points out the role of past listening experiences and generational differences of Le Zbor members in coming to an agreement about this matter. As the youngest in the choir at that moment, she shares with me that mostly the younger members—the ones who did not experience Yugoslav socialism themselves—feel uncomfortable simply presenting the repertoire as praising the historical experience of the PLS. She says they are concerned that people will perceive their singing as “frozen in the past”—entangled historically, discursively, and performatively with memories of state socialism—and therefore inefficient in addressing the contemporary condition. On the opposite end, members aged forty-five and older do not share these concerns but encourage younger ones to embrace the complexity of the Yugoslav socialist project and its dissolution. Svea finds this intergenerational exchange necessary for the most efficient political recuperations of the songs’ ideas and values.¹³

¹¹ The song is “Drugarice, posadimo sveće” (Female comrade, let’s plant flowers). The verse is often used to glorify the legacies of the Yugoslav socialist revolution but in an ironic manner, as criticism of the revolution’s broken revolutionary promises.

¹² Svea, interview by the author, April 3, 2019, Zagreb.

¹³ Svea, interview by the author, April 3, 2019, Zagreb.

Despite discord in deciding the framework for presenting their repertoires and activities, choir members generally agree that embracing anti-fascism suits their self-organized strivings and dedication to amateur, participatory, and spontaneous performative configurations. It infuses their singing with an aura of an everyday, activist, and action-oriented practice.¹⁴ I talk to several choir members who note that anti-fascism's resistant ethos allows reconnecting with socialist ideas not as a "systemic ideology" or state project but as an ethical platform on which they can reach consensus. Self-organization and cooperation—the salient features of building and sustaining a collective that is, as Marija puts it, "an exemplar of people from the street"¹⁵—demand a "coalitional" enterprise. Such a stance aligns with the notion of anti-fascism as a multilayered ethical-political formation open to the inscriptions of various and, at times, conflicting understandings, ideological positions, and experiences (Spinetti, Schoop, and Hofman 2021, 127).¹⁶

Yet the main challenge for choir members is exactly the massive use of the category of anti-fascism by actors across the political spectrum. This term has been largely instrumentalized by conservative or even nationalist actors not only in the region (Kuljić 2006) but also more globally (Copsey 2010). Moreover, anti-fascism has circulated in the everyday political discourse as the "label" that can be filled in with different (and often contradictory) meanings. Choir members are aware of it, but they still believe in sustaining its political currency. As summarized by Srđan, a member of Naša pjesma: "When the ruling elites overtake the torch of anti-fascism, one has to look for a new one."¹⁷

¹⁴ This approach recalls the principles of the transnational anti-fascist organizing that goes under the name Antifa or AFA (short for Anti-fascist Action) that cultivates the intersection of pan-socialist and direct-action strategies (Bray 2017, xiv–xv) and is nowadays almost ubiquitously linked to anti-fascist organizing. Although activist choirs occasionally collaborate with or participate in events organized by local Antifa branches, they distinguish themselves from this network.

¹⁵ Marija, interview by the author, October 28, 2015, Belgrade.

¹⁶ Authors who discuss anti-fascism in its historical and contemporary forms often point out that from its foundation in the 1920s and later trajectories, an inclusive or coalitional notion served as a basis for shaping anti-fascism. The best illustration of this is the term "anti-fascist minimum," coined by Nigel Copsey, who claims that anti-fascism is a hybrid ideology and an outlet for ideological, social, and geographical diversity in interwar Britain (2010, xiv). In her interaction with the members of Hor 29. Novembar, Jelena Gligorijević observed how they see anti-fascism as a platform for expressing diverse political viewpoints within the Left. This demands continuous engagement with historical legacies of anti-fascism in relation to its current notions, roles and relevance through discussions, explanations, and reconsiderations (2024, 130).

¹⁷ Interview by the author, August 14, 2018, Belgrade.

Choirs do that by simultaneously distancing from the misuse of the historical legacy of the PLS by the liberal and conservative political actors and keeping the notion of anti-fascism broad enough to address the contemporary struggle against any kind of oppression. For the former, the historian Hrvoje Klasić uses the phrase “extension of anti-fascism” (in Pulig 2019), an attempt to promulgate a generalized notion of anti-fascism as an all-encompassing symbolic category for any critical stance or action that does not necessarily correspond to historical events.

To summarize, choir members embrace anti-fascism as the way to situate their activities within the broader spatiotemporal contexts, connecting the past and present local and international struggles. This move allows them to sustain the socialist revolutionary legacies of Yugoslav anti-fascism by navigating the minefields of what they see as the “troubled histories” of state socialism. Choirs use a discourse of contemporary anti-fascism to recuperate socialist ideas and values in a way that transcends the historical socialist project while still foregrounding its general values.

Lived vs. Imagined Socialism

To fully understand the choirs’ embrace of anti-fascism, we must remember that the experience of state socialism is not only haunted by the bloody dissolution of Yugoslavia but also figures as a failed experiment in dominant interpretative frameworks. The 1989 fall of the Berlin Wall cast a shadow on “really existing socialism” (Scott 2014, 11) as an alternative to contemporary capitalism. State socialism has been “reassessed” not only by the political actors from the right-wing or liberal political spectrum but also by the Left, who strive toward the new political alternative, moving away from the historical socialist project. While liberal and right-wing actors consider state socialism a totalitarian regime doomed to failure, those on the Left criticize it for institutionalizing and draining socialist revolutionary ideals. Autonomous Marxists and other left-oriented groups and intellectuals have charged socialist states with excessive bureaucracy and corruption (Badiou 2012, 37) while investing in the search for new anti-capitalist political projects.¹⁸ Informed by the same urge to respond to the presumed failure of

¹⁸ See, e.g., the idea of multitude (Hardt and Negri 2000).

socialist project, the choirs face an irreconcilable tension between socialism as lived and as imagined.

When asked, choir members usually name social security, free schooling, and the right to public health care and housing as the main advantages of living under socialism. Nevertheless, this does not imply a desire to return to that system or Yugoslavia; rather, it represents a longing for a “socialist solution.” Beginning our conversation about Horkestar, Ružica says: “On the one hand, we are not a communist choir; on the other, what are you inviting now?”¹⁹ Members of different post-Yugoslav activist collectives share the dilemma expressed in Ružica’s account. The anthropologist Maple Razsa notices that anarchist and anti-globalist activists, too, are also hesitant to identify with “socialism as it was.” He even offers a self-reflective account of his own sense of the loss of Yugoslavia, not as a political system but as a utopian project. He frames this as the longing not for Yugoslavia’s political hopes but “for political hope itself” (2015, 6), a stance consistent with what members express in their accounts.

Reflecting on this in our conversation, Marko states that members of Hor 29. Novembar focus more on socialism as an idea than on its actual implementation. “If someone asked me what our repertoire depicts, I would say struggle, revolution, victory over fascism, and [that] we are the ones making the future. A future socialism, not the one we had.” He further underscores that members often feel unable to grasp all the complexities and ambiguities inherent in this historical experience. For this reason, many aspects of the Yugoslav socialist project are still considered taboo. What remains imperative for them, however, is not losing faith in the idea as such: “We have to build socialism from the ground up,” he states, “which does not mean that we do not recall some positive aspects of Yugoslavia, which I see in general as achievements.”²⁰ Bojana similarly says that avoiding songs that mention Yugoslavia or Tito does not imply criticism of Yugoslav socialism as such but stands as an act of distancing themselves from a socialist state that failed to put into practice the revolutionary strivings: “It is not about some negative relation between partisan and Yugoslav experience; it is just that the Yugoslav period took much from these songs, and this use gave them a negative connotation.”²¹ In recuperating partisan songs within the contemporary political

¹⁹ Ružica, interview by the author, October 24, 2018, Belgrade.

²⁰ Marko, interview by the author, January 9, 2020, Vienna.

²¹ Bojana, interview by the author, June 14, 2013, Ljubljana.

struggles, the constant challenge for the choir members is thus sustaining a partial disentanglement from the “official” aspects of the socialist experience that was presumed to be “state-imposed” and finding a way to recuperate the songs in a fresh, politicized way.

In many instances when we meet and talk, choir members affirm the importance of idealism, something that was, in their opinion, lost in the post-World War II era, when from the revolution, socialism became the official politics. As Teja explains, when “caught by the system,” the songs lost their primary role, function, and potential; in short—their “true spirit,” which was the main reason people did not want to sing them anymore. She adds that the official appropriation trivialized their core ideas and values, which further contributed to the failure of a socialist project drained of its “original political values.” For this reason, the choirs’ main task is to regain the lost energy and drive of the songs as a precondition for transmitting the socialist ideas and values about which they sing.²² In an interview given later that year, Teja says she was delighted to see that listeners and the media recognized Kombinat’s attempts to recuperate the “true spirit” of the songs. She refers to one media report that granted their singing the power to “penetrate to frightened people’s hearts in every way” because it puts the songs in their right, original place, noting: “[A]ll revolutionary, fighting, rebel, and partisan songs emerged from humanitarian and sincere motives, when it was necessary to express your soul and vent your feelings—irrespective of the color and image of oppressive regimes” (Štucin 2013).

Fighting what they see as the systemic “draining” of the songs’ inherent energy, choir members tend to recover the “core” political potential that mediates the socialist emancipatory strivings. In other words, they believe in the mobilizing power of the accumulated affective charge of the songs conceived and performed in the historical moments of emancipatory social transformation (such as the French Revolution, the 1848 Revolution, the October Revolution, the Yugoslav socialist revolution, etc.). Their attempts echo the common view on partisan songs as the unique resonance of the revolutionary moment. In their introduction to the *Collection of Partisan Folk Songs* from 1962, Nikola Hercigonja and Oskar Danon note that during the PLS, songs resounded in their full mobilizing power: “A thought, an idea realized by sound was transmitted on the same wavelength to the mass. Consciousnesses, various consciousnesses, a multitude of them, flickered on

²² Teja, interview by the author, March 28, 2013, Koper.

the same vibration, on the same number of blinks, on the same tune” (1962, xvi–xvii). This quotation poetically portrays to what extent the conditions of revolutionary change suffused partisan songs with an exceptional affectivity.

Biographical sources similarly portray singing during the PLS as an instinctive “scream” that channels the intimate and spontaneous moments of collective vulnerability. For this reason, the songs articulated the unsettled emotions of the masses—an intense and complex emotional mix of pain, suffering, distress, empathy, enthusiasm, and even euphoria (Hercigonja and Danon 1962, xxi). In the memoir of music activities in partisan units, composer Miroslav Špiler describes the deep, almost cathartic feelings surrounding every moment of musical expression during World War II. He writes that the revolutionary spirit shaped all expressive activities, regardless of their content (in Tomašek 1982, 334). Collective singing was equally crucial for uplifting the revolutionary spirit in the liberated territories, where it shaped an atmosphere of delight, joy, happiness, and trust (Tomašek 1982, 249). Recollecting his partisan days, one of the leading party ideologists and functionaries, Boris Kidrič, describes how singing “The Internationale” united fighters through “its symbolic authority that is expressed already in its melody” (Jože Javoršek in Komelj 2009, 389). In a similar vein, Avdo Smailović bears witness to the moment when partisans heard the first verses of “Po šumama i gorama” and immediately started walking with more decisive steps, almost shedding previous signs of fatigue or exhaustion (in Tomašek 1982, 313).

We can see these testimonies as an historical account of how performing and listening to certain musical genres is particularly affectively charged. Ellen Gray was one of the first to offer ethnographic insights into the different registers of feelings that the genre of fado triggers in its listeners in the Portuguese capital, Lisbon. The affectivity of fado allows various individual and collective memories, experiences, and feelings to emerge, which is why, she claims, when listening to this genre “history is rendered as a feeling” (2013, 9). Dafni Tragaki similarly explores rebetiko in the post–Greek Civil War (1946–1949) as an affective archive of social pain, deprivation, and exile and its political resonances in contemporary Greek society (2015).

Choir members’ investment in the transhistorical revolutionary fervor rests on the presumed “vitality” of affect, which, although captured by power relations, escapes an ideological capture. Examining their attempts to sustain the affective power of the songs as a key to their contemporary political efficacy, I see it important to unpack the need for sustaining this

affect–ideology binary. For Brian Massumi, affect is a concept that offers a new understanding of politics, divergent from the conservative idea of ideological politics (2015). His argument rests on the presumption that, as a living intensity that connects us to the world, affect “exceeds” the capture by the sociocultural context.²³ In response to that, scholars who insist on affect as constitutive of the sociopolitical do not agree with the division between the “affective” and “ideological” but see affect as inherent to any ideology, social structure, or system (Porcello et al. 2010, 20; Leys 2011; Rutherford 2016; Hofman 2020a).

For my discussion, I find it important to acknowledge that the distinction between “affective” and “ideological” is itself a strategic move, something choir members find helpful in sustaining the political valence of their activities. Similar strategies can be also found in other contexts where the political engagement is saturated by apathy or exhaustion. Darci Sprengel shows how the employment of a perceived pre-cultural universality of affect by musicians in post-revolutionary Egypt is a way of reclaiming new utopian forms of politics in the condition of political apathy caused by the unsuccessful revolution (2019). Deliberately refusing to be “political,” musicians turn to the “nonideological sonic ineffability” to cultivate a public community beyond the social hierarchies and ideological clashes that characterize the years following the 2011 uprising.

Choir members’ need to sustain the idealist political core of the songs is a strategy to refuse the overshadowing of socialism’s revolutionary and grassroots aspects by systemic appropriations of the revolutionary struggle. Their turn to affectivity is thus a way to recuperate what was lost in the presumed rigid implementation of the socialist revolutionary promises by the state. In other words, it is a result of a presumed distinction between socialism as an “ideological system” (the state structure) and socialism as a revolutionary emancipatory project.

I see the existence of this binary in the accounts of choir members as a signal of a deeper inability (or anxiety) to envision and act toward the “systemic” anti-capitalist solution. Adhering to an anti-systemic discourse not only reduces the historical socialist project to “an ideology” but also implicitly equalizes all systems, from state socialism to present-day

²³ Brian Massumi’s take on affective politics is based on a critique of ideology. What he calls an “autonomic remainder” (1995) is seen as constitutive of the vitality of life itself, a force that moves, stimulates, and transforms worlds in the post-ideological moment (2015).

neoliberal capitalism, regardless of their being radically different sociopolitical formations.

In that sense, choir members' quest for the transhistorical affective quality of the repertoire mirrors the contradiction inherent in the quest for a "nonideological" form of agency in neoliberalism that is itself "deideologized, anesthetized and emptied of all politically substantial content" (Gržinić and Tatlić 2016, xi). Turning to affect, as I see it, exposes what political tools we are left with in the condition of neoliberal exhaustion and the inability to act collectively against the adverse sociopolitical and economic realities.

Singing Activism as Sustaining the Political

Writing about the atmosphere of apathy in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Damir Arsenijević claims that recalling anti-fascism gives a glimpse into the possibility of people's helpless lives. Even though it can mobilize "the paralyzed bodies" (or, I would add, the paralyzed social body) only for an hour or two, a sense of possibility, he asserts, stands against the "blood-soaked capital" that drains "the life from everything" (2016). His reflection points out how acting against exhaustion (materialized as powerlessness, passivity, apathy, even death)—even if it is limited to the here and now—reverberates through the scarcity of political action to give a sense of possibility.

In such a condition, inviting us to reconnect to the revolutionary fervor through singing and listening counters the general dismissal of political idealism.²⁴ I argue, however, that choir members do not simply mobilize a life-sustaining power of collective singing to build a sense of (political) hope in the "no alternative" mentality of neoliberalism (Srnicsek and Williams 2015, 108). The repertoire that depicts socialist revolutionary strivings exposes the exhaustion as essentially attached to neoliberal policies introduced after the dissolution of socialist Yugoslavia. Singing activism helps us to embrace the far-reaching consequences of capitalist privatization and dispossession that are drivers of apathy and exhaustion.

The most intense moments of embracing the shared exhaustion are singing in support of unpaid or fired workers and in front of privatized

²⁴ The overall climate of anti-utopianism since the end of socialism and the country's dissolution moved the political field toward pragmatism, clientelism, and partocracy (Brković 2017; Kurtović 2019).



Figure 6.1 Praksa singing in support of workers at Uljanik-TESU. Author Milivoj Mijošek, courtesy of Edna Strenja Jurcan.

factories. Figure 6.1 shows one such moment, which occurs in 2015 during a Praksa performance in support of the workers of the factory Uljanik-TESU, who are striking over unpaid salaries. As Edna recalls, it was one of the most touching, intense, and powerful experiences she has had in the choir's history. Choir members came together in front of the factory entrance. They greeted workers with two Yugoslav partisan songs ("Padaj silo i nepravdo" and "Mitraljeza") and then continued with several international revolutionary songs ("No pasarán," "A la huelga," and "The Internationale"). Workers, holding banners reading "Destroy and sell," listened attentively as the choir started singing the Italian song "Sebben che siamo donne" (Although we are women), also known as "La lega" (The union). The song starts with the verse, "Even if we are women, we are not afraid." With its traditional Italian melody performed by powerful female voices, the song depicts the struggle for a decent wage and solidarity among female rice paddy workers at the beginning of the nineteenth century,²⁵ when the atmosphere changed. Not understanding the song's lyrics, one of the female Uljanik-TESU workers, with a smile on her face, quietly asked the colleague behind her what the song

²⁵ See the video at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=covmPa5f5K0> (TvIstra, dir. 2015).

was about. As her coworker explained the meanings of the song's lyrics, she became distressed and started to cry. Her reaction triggered an avalanche of emotions. Edna says that choir members started crying one by one, and the performance turned into an intimate moment of sharing accumulated feelings of powerlessness and despair, with workers and choir members hugging each other.²⁶

At many other protests, some of which I describe throughout the book, activist choirs' performances serve as an outlet for unsettling emotions and experiences that were not in line with the promises of prosperity and progress of the neoliberal "reforms." A sensorial engagement with the collective singing of historical repertoires is essential for expressing shared disappointment. On some occasions, choir members find themselves even more apathetic after such events, facing the fact that their actions cannot bring back jobs or salaries or substantially change the position of people protesting despite being powerful and energizing. "We sing out of despair," Tanja tells me after another round of the long and exhaustive struggle of Uljanik workers against the privatization of the factory. Although she does not doubt the "positive effects" of their singing, she admits they are constantly reminded that it is "not enough." After an attempt to perform at the factory to support the group of workers, she feels that singing transformed into mourning for the final loss of any remnants of socialism and the final victory of capitalism. I can feel melancholy in her voice as she recollects their singing as a requiem, a final farewell to rights, infrastructures, or people denied a further (decent) life.

In our interactions and in their internal discussions, choir members often reflect on the presumed lack of an immediate or concrete "outcome" of their singing and an inability to make any "real" intervention in political reality. Observing their discussions, I often feel similarly, oscillating between optimism and deep doubt about how my research and writing about singing activism may contribute to our everyday struggles. The meme by Naša pjesma members (see Figure 6.2) captures those anxieties, illustrating an ironic (self-)reflection of the choir's public perception.

In one of our talks, Edna asserts that the unsuccessful, long, and exhausting struggle for Uljanik made Praksa members realize that they could still sustain the belief in collective political organizing in fighting the detrimental consequences of neoliberal policies. After the 2018 festival, Le Zbor

²⁶ Edna, interview by the author, July 10, 2017, Pula.



Figure 6.2 Meme about how the members of Naša pjesma see themselves vs. reality. Courtesy of the Naša pjesma archive.

members make this explicit by saying that singing activism brings energy back to people and encourages them to continue recognizing the shared Yugoslav experience as the ground for collective action:

We are aware that the choir festival will not necessarily achieve the same social change as big protests. However, our goal is to be loud at the moment when those opinions and perspectives are deliberately ignored and stifled by a part of society. With the gathering of choirs from the region, we want to show that divisions on a nationalist basis are a “bogeyman” used to scare people, so they do not see what is wrong “in their own backyard.” (Borković 2018)

These and many similar comments illustrate how singing activism tends to make an affective rupture in the sociopolitical realities by building alliances based on shared experiences of exhaustion, dispossession, and alienation. As Edmund Berger puts it, “In our laboring bodies we are far more isolated from one another and from the production itself; in our time and our minds

we are [in] fact more exhausted; in our leisure far more seduced; in our relationships far more atomized” (2017, 130). In other words, despite its inability to disrupt neoliberal economic and political power structures, singing activism works against the bleeding of potential for collective action in the face of political fragility. It serves as a tool for political survival or rather the very survival of the political.

By exposing capitalist exploitation and privatization as marked on the bodies and souls of people in the region and worldwide, singing activism builds a capacity to (re-)embrace socialism as a legitimate political idea. It is an embodied reminder that we cannot relinquish socialist politics and align with the discourses about its historical failure. Addressing the dead end of capitalist promise, choirs opt for a renewed relationship to the idea and historical experience of socialism as remodeled, reinvented, and reconstructed by and in the now.

This statement by Kombinat members at the opening of the International May Day School in Ljubljana particularly resonates: “Until recently, both socialism and songs of resistance seemed to be far away in the past, but capitalism once again has plunged us into an abysmal crisis in which resistance has become a necessity while the melody of revolutionary songs is a harbinger of the coming of socialism!”²⁷

Reimagining the Structures of Anti-Capitalist Politics

Kombinat members’ invoking the coming of socialism would not be so powerful in its idealist promise if singing activism did not create a space for everyday engagement with these ideas. As I state throughout this book, activist choirs work toward detaching an aura of professionalism from choral performance and challenging the presumed need for musical skill or knowledge as a prerequisite to join the singing collective. Their activities occupy a position that destabilizes the understanding of expressive practices as “art,” reserved only for talented or trained individuals or groups, and the political expectations behind it. Instead, by using the everyday power of singing as a leisure activity, they not only envision but also put into practice a sonically based organizational model for cultured leisure, one that is gradually disappearing from the sociopolitical horizon.

²⁷ “Otvorile bomo Prvomajsko šolo DPU” (2013).

Discussing how we can foresee an alternative future for our troubled planet, Abigail De Kosnik (2019) argues that cultural production will depend on amateur archivists when the world collapses due to catastrophic climate change, fossil fuel exhaustion, economic precarity, and political unrest. She grounds her provocative thesis on the perception of amateurism as the seed of a new post-capitalist infrastructure that, in the absence of official or state structures, will sustain the fields of culture and arts. Since amateurs will help rebuild the world from the ashes, their roles will radically shift from the fringes and margins to the status of main actors.

I find the thesis about our post-capitalist future that relies on amateurism seductive, particularly in terms of amateurism's world-making potential. Nevertheless, the contextualized perspective I offer in this book shows that this thesis is not new. It was already put into practice in the building of socialism, where amateurism—at least in the Yugoslav case—was essential in working toward a classless society based on social ownership. This knowledge and experience have been neglected in critical thought, overshadowed by the stories of the repressive socialist regime or state socialism as a failed experiment, and consequently excluded from co-envisioning our anti-capitalist future.

I believe we must reclaim this knowledge and practice. The choir members' strivings, I argue, not only show a need for the politicization of amateurism in the condition of neoliberal exhaustion but also point out that thinking and working toward future anti-capitalist projects cannot be done without seriously considering the state-socialist experiences. Such experiences might intervene in the increasing interest of official policies in amateurism in different contexts. In the last several years, we witness how the rhetoric of amateurism has been gradually penetrating the mainstream discourses and has been increasingly present in promoting participatory forms of civic engagement by local municipalities or state governments. For example, the European Commission-funded project EU-Citizen.Science, which supports the active role of volunteers in community-based scientific projects, highly relies on amateurs' involvement in collecting and classifying data. Such a model draws on passion, cooperation, and volunteerism as valuable sources for educating the public and raising awareness. It also initiates new innovative projects that target building communities around scientific topics.

Nevertheless, these approaches to amateurism aim to engage people in different forms of unpaid activities within the existing capitalist modes of production, where being an amateur is in the hands of those with the privilege to

occupy leisure. Therefore, it shows that we must be careful of the institutionalized efforts when the neoliberal state, political class, and the capital itself co-opt collective becoming through amateur activities.

In my examination of singing activism, I stand for amateurism not as a remedy or corrective for the top-down official policies that leave capitalist relations unharmed. I pursue the possibility of amateurism to be the main force in dismantling those relations. Strategic amateurism of the choirs tends to cultivate musical forms of organization that challenge the deep structural dysfunction of the capitalist social order. What makes their strategizing particularly powerful is that they create an outlet for an embodied experience of collectivity centered on an awareness of exploitative and profit-oriented forms of life. Strategic amateurism allows the building and maintaining of cultured leisure as an alternative to the privatized field of cultural offerings that maintain class-based inequalities, exploitation, and alienation.

In summary, strategic amateurism is a call to fight what is at the heart of contemporary neoliberal capitalist domination—complete submission to market logic and capital in all spheres of life. It does not recall an “alternative” or “bottom-up” ethos central to political mobilization from the Left today. Instead, it focuses on the systemic conditions that shape the very possibility of being politically engaged through expressive activities, an understanding largely abandoned due to the profound shift from the rhetoric of class struggle to the one of identity and diversity. Throughout the chapters of *Socialism Now*, I have demonstrated how our struggles are not limited to the waged sphere but are transferred to social and intimate life, which neoliberal exhaustion and exploitative, profit-driven relationships have depleted. I have described how strategic amateurism tends to reinsert into the discussion of both leisure and labor beyond their roles in capitalist value production and commodities creation and consumption. Choirs’ performative strategies affectively recall class-based solidarity as the ultimate opposition to the dominant forms of the neoliberal production of life, the one based on identity politics in the service of profit-making.

However, my account is far from celebratory. It depicts the choir members’ anxieties and discomforts attached to the limited “efficacy” of their activities. I show how, while searching for the anti-capitalist solution, choir members are involved in the struggles over the contemporary political value of socialist ideas and experiences. Yet those struggles testify to an urgent need to sustain a capacity to understand the complexities of the state socialist project. As I have extensively described throughout the chapters, the unsettling and

uneasy attachments to the historical project of socialism still do not allow for the quick dismissal of class and political economy as legitimate objects of political discourse. The strategic amateurism of activist choirs opens a space for an embodied engagement with the socialist project to collectively face the scars of exploitation and commodification as the first step toward reimagining given social relations.

I hope *Socialism Now* will stimulate further thinking about anti-capitalist potentials of music and sound from different parts of the globe. As difficult as it is to think about the realization of future socialism right now, we have to constantly work toward demystifying the presumed neoliberal totality and envision new structural mechanisms to fight capitalist domination until, as Edna puts it, people will “bravely sing new songs of the change to come” (Angeleski 2019).

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