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**Review: *Eastern Europeans in Contemporary Culture: Imagining New Europe*, Vedrana Veličković (London Palgrave, 2019), ISBN 978-1-137-53791-1, IX + 219 pages. Hbk, £109.99, ebook £87.50.**

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In *Eastern Europeans in Contemporary Culture: Imagining New Europe*, Vedrana Veličković examines how the experiences of eastern European migrants in Britain is reflected and interpreted in British cultural and political discourse and by the lived experiences and art of the migrants themselves.

The political and economic controversies around the issues of eastern European migration into Britain (principally since the accession of the first tranche of former Communist states into the European Union in 2004) have proven to have longstanding social consequences, culminating in the Brexit vote of 2016 and continuing during the rapid political flux in Britain since the referendum. In this work Veličković succeeds in unpicking the various elements of this generally toxic political debate, giving back the subjects of this ongoing debate their voices and seeing beyond the initial perceptions of the reader of the issues.

Key to this process in Veličković's impressive analysis is examining with refreshing candour the presumptions underlying the concepts of 'eastern' and 'new' Europe. The designation of 'eastern' Europe itself is, as Veličković explains, a value judgement and act of 'othering' with its roots in the cold war division of Europe (3), despite the fact that many of these states (Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic) would consider themselves to be part of central European cultural and political traditions.

Similarly, the positive connotations of 'New Europe' are rooted in the neo-liberal reconfiguration of these states throughout the 1990s and beyond, to the extent that then United State Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld favourably compared the political support provided by these states for military intervention in Iraq in 2003 with the reluctance of the 'old Europe' represented by France and Germany. Furthermore, British interactions with the concept of 'eastern' Europe are often geographically or politically misinformed, with an inability to recognise or discern between nation states (7), and with migrants themselves only seen through a standard set of tropes – those of Polish builders, Romanian fruit pickers, and Albanian nannies amongst others (9).

Veličković's assessment begins with a comprehensive review of the British obsession with the migrant issue, encompassing the Gillian Duffy controversy of 2010, *The Daily Mail*, *The Daily Telegraph*, Nigel Farage, the two BBC documentaries *The Poles Are Coming!* (2008) and *The Great Big Romanian Invasion* (2014), and the fallout from the Brexit vote of 2016. The latter is referenced in depth in later chapters, and this provides a vital albeit depressing primer on the ongoing British obsession with migrants and its often surreal manifestations.

A further welcome layer of Veličković's analysis is a recognition of the ambivalent, or even exploitative, relationship between the newly acceded states and the political

and economic systems that they purportedly aim to emulate. Assessments of post-communism have generally emphasised the problems faced by states as they move from command economic-political structures to the ‘normalcy’ of modern western liberal democracy, but the process by which those societies met the standards for EU accession yielded considerable cost to their economies and society as a whole (12). This led to the social conditions which made emigration to wealthier European states so necessary and desirable for many. In this way, it is possible that substantial external migration was an inevitable result of the neoliberal ‘shock therapy’ that many states had to undertake to join the European Union in the first place, and this ambivalence of attitude even within the European project itself is addressed at length in the book.

Veličković examines these ideas through the depictions of eastern Europeans in a variety of media. The chapter ‘It’s A Free World’ deals with contemporary film and televisual portrayals of migrants and the often depressingly repetitive (and overwhelmingly negative) clichés involved – that of the migrant from the ‘uncivilised’ or ‘undeveloped’ East, with poor personal habits and clothing, and their perceived difficulty to adapt to British life. Here even the well-meaning liberal commentariat are noted to refer to ‘an Eastern European looking chap in a denim jacket’, and the romanticised figure of the ‘postcommunist Robinson Crusoe’ (43) travelling to find the future in new lands is always undermined by the fundamentally exploitative economic situation that awaits them. The writer succeeds in giving much of this material (including *Once* (2007), *Eastern Promises* (2007) and *Somers Town* (2008)) rather more credit than they might expect, but finds particular merit in the refreshingly unsentimental realism of the Ken Loach film that gives the chapter its title, and which deals with the neglected issue of recruitment agencies and the exploitative positions in which they place the migrant workers they purport to represent (47).

The even-handedness of this approach is tested even further in the next chapter, which explores the representation of Eastern Europeans in modern British fiction. The lack of rigour and rampant clichés in some of these works are nonetheless identified, such as the Albanian working in the UK who is inexplicably able to regularly drive home across the continent in Rachel Cusk’s *Transit* (2006) (72), and the character of Lev returning to his (unnamed) east European country in Rose Tremain’s *The Road Home* (2008) (73). Lev in particular reveals a peculiarly patronising characterisation of the new European migrants in much British fiction – unable to operate turnstiles, naïve about living costs, and ignorant of the realities of modern life. As Veličković rightly observes, we are left with ‘the impression that Lev is a traveller from a previous century, rather than [...] twenty-first century “Eastern Europe”’ (76). It is Marina Lewycka’s

*Two Caravans* (2007) which appears to reflect more accurately the precarious nature and grim vulnerability of the migrant experience. Hence Veličković observes an echo of Marx's economic analysis in the novel's critique of zero-hours and non-unionised working (95).

Considerably more light is able to be shed on these issues in Veličković's discussion of Eastern European authors themselves, as they 'write back' against the political trends both in their home nation-state and their reflections in British and European culture. The transformative power of shared experience and language to recreate a lost cultural space – especially in this case the 'lost' space of a country that no longer exists – is central to Dubravka Ugresić's *The Ministry of Pain* (2005), where a group of exiled former Yugoslav students and their lecturer struggle to deal with the fatelessness of their transient existence in Amsterdam (114). Less elucidating in this context is A. M. Bakalar's *Madame Mephisto* (2012), where the Polish narrator's experiences in Britain only appear to create a strangely alienated impact on their perceptions of Poland which appear to reuse many of the negative clichés present in British works on the subject (123).

Veličković also explores the intriguing possibility of an alliance between eastern European migrants and the black British community, which is handled with due consideration of the fact that predominantly white east European migrants may not necessarily be identified as migrants until something (a surname, an accent) reveal them to be so. The problem of racism within eastern European communities is acknowledged, but the avenues of shared experiences of discrimination and 'otherness' are set out in works such as Kwame Kwei-Armah's play *Let There Be Love* (2009) (141). Notably, the playwright rues blunt semiotics and remembers that 'just as every West Indian was Jamaican when I was growing up, every Eastern European [today] was Polish'. Mike Philip's *You Think You Know Me But You Don't* (2005) features a protagonist called Victor, who represents for Veličković a migrant of rare agency, transcending the limitations of the form by expressing the challenges of migrant identity and subverting the audience's expectations.

It has been five years since the creation of a new border 'wall' between Hungary and Serbia when the states of 'new Europe' faced the challenges of the 2015 refugee crisis, coming 26 years after the opening of the Austria-Hungarian border in 1989 began the process which led to the states of 'new Europe' joining the EU. It would be tempting to view this as the end of the period representing the fully liberating potential of the European integratory project. Furthermore, the exploitation of the material needs of the poor who have lost out in the modern economic model of Europe – referenced by

Veličković here in relation to the use of Roma villages in *Borat* (2006) – is still an issue today, as evidenced by the similar issues allegedly arising in the production of this year's *Borat* sequel. The issue of the representation and misrepresentation of eastern European migrants has therefore proven to be a remarkably durable and often toxic part of British political discourse, and it would be optimistic to believe that this will change for the better in the near future, so Veličković's timely work is an essential reference point for those interested in exploring the issue further.

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**Competing Interests**

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

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