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Uncommon Alliances: Cultural Narratives of Migration in the New Europe

Nataša Kovačević

272 pages, 2018, £80 (hardback)

Edinburgh University Press

Reviewed by Filippo Menozzi, Liverpool John Moores University

How can we make sense of the current crisis of the European Union? Today, the EU seems to be challenged by two contrasting forces: on the one hand, the rise of nationalistic feelings and xenophobic politics in many European states seems to tear the Union apart from within. On the other hand, the erosion of borders and the acceleration of the global circulation of goods, people and capital make any insular thinking of the EU impossible. Beyond any cohesion and exceptionalism, Europe is traversed by vaster social and economic tendencies.

The crisis of the EU also testifies to a deeper predicament of the cultural imagination: while the nation-state, as a political formation, stumbles in recurrent crises, any non-national or post-national alternative seems to be difficult to imagine and almost impossible to achieve. Accordingly, current thinking of community appears to be trapped between the repressive side of national identity and the ideological concealments of capitalist globalism. The very concept of Europe, as well as its incarnation in the neoliberal and neocolonial structures represented by the EU, embodies this unsolvable antinomy.

In her new book, *Uncommon Alliances*, Nataša Kovačević delves into these complexities and antinomies. As she writes in the introduction, the EU “is neither just a super-nation – an assembly of nations – nor has it completely transcended the apparatus of the nation” (3). In Kovačević’s work, however, the space articulated by this “neither/nor” emerges as a creative and contested ground of expression and representation. *Uncommon Alliances* articulates a highly interdisciplinary analysis of literary texts, artworks, social theories and historical experiences, offering a thought-provoking, ambitious and fascinating research into the contradictions that underlie contemporary Europe. One of the most striking and valuable aspects of this book is the recourse to a wide range of media, genres, and aesthetic forms in order to reflect on possibilities for reshaping a European sense of community.

The first chapter is thus titled “Performing the State: Artistic Representations of European Community” and critically examines the self-image of Europe as a cohesive community by looking at

contemporary performance art. Slovenian art collective Neue Slowenische Kunst's and Czech artist David Černý's works are among the forms of expression addressed by Kovačević in her cogent engagement with the (im)possibility of thinking Europe as an organic community of *people*. The book's robust critique of multiculturalism is complemented by the attempt to think other possible ways of being in common – or “uncommon alliances” as the title eloquently puts it – that go beyond ethnic identity and rather stem from common predicaments. Kovačević's approach is guided by a materialist concept of the aesthetic which makes her work able to link affects, ideologies and politics in a meaningful continuum. The second chapter, “Alternative Hospitalities on the Margins of Europe,” tackles both literary and cinematic materials in order to explore Europe's necropolitical regimes, governmentality and politics of bordering. Interestingly, this chapter connects novels such as Mahi Binebine's *Welcome to Paradise* and Laila Lalami's *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits* to films like *Terraferma* and *Eternity and a Day*. Chapter three is about “Colonial Spectres in Europe's Historiography” and expands on the literary dimension of this book by reading novels such as Jamal Mahjoub's *Travelling with Djinn*s, Leila Sebbar's *The Seine Was Red* and Bernardino Evaristo's *Soul Tourists*. This chapter reinstates Europe's repressed colonial pasts by considering literary representations that manifest forms of dissent against the grain of Europe's colonial aphasias. The fourth chapter, which precedes the concluding epilogue, is titled “Postcolonial and Postcommunist Contact Zones in a United Europe” and is a highly thought-provoking part of the book. Indeed, echoing Mary Louise Pratt's concept of the “contact zone,” this chapter enriches the analysis of the predicaments of Europe with a consideration of post-communist countries and their ways of inhabiting the European space. The chapter focuses on novels such as Mike Philips's *A Shadow of Myself* and Dubravka Ugrešić's *Ministry of Pain*. It reconnects the history of Europe to histories of decolonisation and the experience of communism. Building on these narratives, Kovačević raises an important point about the possibility of a different narrative for Europe which would be able to eschew both multiculturalism and neoliberalism. Including post-communist narratives also evidences the inequalities that run through the continent as well as the refractions of the European ideal beyond Western countries. References to former Yugoslavia punctuate this book as a sort of elective affinity and a mirror for Europe to rethink the cultural, social and political dimensions of being in common beyond the nation-state.

Kovačević's *Uncommon Alliances* is a welcome intervention into cultural and political discourses on Europe and it is highly valuable for many reasons. Firstly, the book goes beyond any facile celebration of multiculturalism and its attendant identity politics, an ideological form

masking the interests of capital and repressive forms of community, while also avoiding celebrating a simple return to the nation-state. The ground opened by this book is a fine line between solidarity and identification, community and otherness, Europe and non-Europe. The literary texts analysed in the book express the dilemmas and experiences of people who inhabit Europe through forms of peripheral consciousness that expose Europe's ideological blind spots. Secondly, Nataša Kovačević's book is valuable as it affiliates postcolonial and post-communist discourses in thoughtful and productive ways. The very notion of "uncommon alliance" that gives the book its title, from this point of view, captures the spectrum of structures of feeling explored in this book. By affiliating the experience of Eastern Europe to the experiences of migrants from Europe's former colonies, the book opens new possibilities for internationalism and cultural resistance. Finally, *Uncommon Alliances* offers a thoughtful reflection on the question of community by engaging with important philosophers from Antonio Negri to Etienne Balibar, Jean-Luc Nancy and Maurice Blanchot. The unique combination of philosophy, literary criticism, film studies, performance art criticism, sociology and cultural studies that composes this book makes it a highly recommended intervention for de-provincialising Europe in the twenty-first century.