Cosmopolitan nationalism and the cultural reach of the White British

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Biographical Notes

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Abstract

In recent years, strong claims have been made for the breakdown of national boundaries and the re-formation of national identities in an increasingly interconnected global world – driven in large part by the possibilities and limitations that emerge from an increasingly global *media* world. It has been argued that new post-national, cosmopolitan subjectivities accompany, enable and feed-off globally oriented forms of cultural consumption. This paper examines these claims in the light of unusually comprehensive data on the tastes of the white British population collected in a large national sample survey, in-depth interviews, and focus groups. By identifying and analysing the geographical spread of the cultural referents of the tastes of the white British we make an empirical assessment of the claims for cosmopolitan identities. We argue that, if white British identities are being reformed by processes of globalisation it is, paradoxically, in an increasingly Anglophone direction.

Key Words: Cosmopolitanism, culture, national identity, taste.

Word-count: 7,949

Introduction: Cultural contact, cosmopolitanism and the 'national' imagination.

During the 1990s the analysis of nationalism pitched those who emphasised the modernity of nationalism, linked to the role of state building and modern forms of print communication, against those who emphasised the long term historical bases of national identities emerging out of complex webs of ethnic affiliations and cultural tensions (e.g. Anderson 2006; Breuilly 1993, Smith 1995, 1986). Recently, there has been increasing recognition that globalisation, mobility and migration have somewhat altered the stakes of these debates. These developments demand a somewhat different analytical approach, focusing on everyday practices and the cultural meanings of national belonging in hybrid conditions (Billig 1995; Hearn 2007; Smith 2008), and relating contemporary nationalism to cosmopolitanism (Calhoun 2007, 2008) as the dominant form of apparently 'post-national' identity.

In Nick Stevenson's words cosmopolitanism tends to be conceptualised as

> 'a way of viewing the world that among other things dispenses with national exclusivity. …. Arguably cosmopolitan thinking is concerned with the transgression of boundaries and markers and the development of a genuinely inclusive cultural democracy and citizenship for an information age' (Stevenson 2003: 332)

In this paper, by contrast, we argue, on the basis of significant empirical evidence on the geographical spread of cultural tastes, that cosmopolitanism does not necessarily mark a break from distinctly national cultures, as much as a complex reworking of

them. We follow here in the footsteps of Calhoun (2003) who famously defines cosmopolitanism as complicit with the world view of corporate executive 'frequent travellers', who have the ability to (reworking Simmel's famous phrase about the 'stranger') 'come today and leave the day after tomorrow'. In this perspective cosmopolitanism is not only linked to the privileged classes but is also central to the hold of ethnic and religious divisions characterised by the (so called) 'War on Terror' and what Huntington (1996) identifies as the 'Clash of Civilisations'. Thus Calhoun (2007) underlines the ambiguity of cosmopolitanism. On the one hand, in societies and in a world where cultural diversity is a norm, it is easier or more feasible people for people to live together in egalitarian terms. However, on the other hand, taking into account that inter-personal solidarities come from particularistic, specific or local social interrelations, a locally disembedded orientation damages social solidarity. Drawing on these perspectives, we can see how cosmopolitan identities can be central to the reworking of white, Christian, Eurocentric and Anglophone identities.

Our position emphasises the need to understand the relationships between cosmopolitanism and nationalism as a part of a broader global process, which is attentive to how cultural signifiers from different parts of the globe are configured into a distinctively national formation. Here there is an important difference from the 1990s debate on nationalism which pitched modernists, who emphasised ''the invention of nationalism', in which the nation is seen as a cultural artefact or 'imagined community' (Anderson 2006) against primordialists who emphasised the nation as durable 'historic deposit' (Smith 1986). Both accounts differently analysed what might be termed the 'internal formation of nations' - for instance the development of transport networks, schooling systems, citizenship entitlements, and the existence of key symbolic referents

of the nation which were appreciated by the national population. By emphasising the role of 'cosmopolitan nationalism', however, we can focus on how constructions of the nation are also bound up with global flows and movements. This involves criticising the view that contemporary forms of cultural production and circulation, and consumption shatter national boundaries and permit new fluidities in the movement of people, signs, artefacts and identities in the way proposed by sociologists such as Albrow (1996), Castells (1996) and Robertson (1995). We argue, in contrast, that national cultures can be remade through contemporary cultural flows (see more generally, Calhoun 2007, 2008) whilst also recognising that, following Smith (1986) the so-called 'hybridization' or 'fragmentation' of national identities are phenomena that run in parallel with the maintenance of the privileged political or symbolical positions by *ethnicities* which were dominant in the first place.

We therefore part company from sociological arguments that flows promote new kinds of homogeneous spaces, or what Augé (1995) famously called 'non-places'. The world of shopping malls and motorway interchanges, airport lounges, waterfront developments and suburban estates seemed to evoke new kinds of global spaces which could be found in all nations. Instead we emphasise that, in the wake of intensified geo-political tensions, global cultural flows involve the proliferation of diverse cultural signifiers and global connections that can generate new kinds of national identity (Gilroy 1993; Ong 1999; Kalra et al. 2005; Papastergiadis 2000). Appadurai's emphasis on the proliferating flows of different 'scapes' has been influential in pointing to the way that distinct identities are constructed through mobilising specific imaginaries (Appadurai 1996). New forms of cultural mobility lend themselves to the re-working of national cultures. In this paper we therefore pursue the argument that cosmopolitanism

allows the reformation of white British identities in an environment which is both multi-cultural and shaped by global cultural flows.

The British case is a particularly interesting one to consider here, having been identified by Calhoun (2008: 431) as the central location for cosmopolitan discourse[i]. British identities have historically been closely linked to empire and trade (Kumar 2005; Cohen 1997) so that it is highly germane to consider how global cultural flows might be remaking Britain's national cultural referents. The complex relations between the English, Scottish, Welsh and Irish have themselves made British national identities (as well as those of its constituent nations) historically fraught and uncertain. This is one reason why British notions of 'high culture' have often looked outwards, for instance to European cultural referents, notably European classical music and literature. This is linked to the relative historical weakness of explicit cultural conceptions of 'Englishness' until the recent past (see Kumar 2005 and Hutchinson et al 2007). Post war changes including de-colonisation and the decline of empire, immigration into the UK, as well as the incorporation of the UK into the European Union pose powerful challenges to British culture which draw on motifs of Eurocentric whiteness and Empire. Although interest in 'whiteness' and 'Britishness' or 'Englishness' as an object of sociological study has risen in recent years (e.g. Jacobson 1997; McCrone 1997; Langlands 1999) there remain relatively few empirical case studies of how this is understood 'on the ground'. Savage et al. (2005) draw on 182 in-depth interviews with predominantly white middle class residents near Manchester to argue that, although many people have considerable global connections with their kinship networks, friendships and life experiences often ranging well beyond UK boundaries, their

salience rarely stretches beyond the Anglophone boundaries of the former British Empire.

To address this limitation, this paper examines in detail the geography of the symbolic imagination of the white British population as it is revealed by their cultural tastes to reflect on their relationship to contemporary national identity. We draw on the unprecedented range and quality of the data collected as part of the ESRC funded 'Cultural Capital and Social Exclusion'[ii] project on cultural taste, participation and knowledge in the UK in 2003-2006 (see Bennett et al 2009). This project involved three components. Firstly, we conducted 25 focus groups with groups from different age groups, geographical locations within the UK, sexualities, occupational groups, and ethnicities. 17 were with 'white British' focus groups. Secondly, we carried out a national sample survey of 1564 respondents (along with a boost survey of 227 respondents drawn from three minority ethnic groups: Pakistani, Indian, and Afro-Caribbeans). This survey contains an unusually varied number of questions on a range of cultural preferences and practices. A particular feature of these questions is that they do not just ask about people's interests for genres but also ask people to identify which named artists, or specific works they know of and like. Because these named artists were deliberately derived from a variety of global locations, we have an unusual means of assessing how our respondents were able to connect with cultural signifiers with different origins. Finally, we also conducted in-depth interviews with respondents to the survey and, where appropriate and possible, their partners. This amounted to a further 44 interviews selected according to a theoretical sample designed to capture a range of social positions (see Silva 2005). Thirty-one of these were with white respondents.

The paper here uses both quantitative and qualitative data. In the second part we deploy our quantitative data, to assess how common it is for respondents to identify artists or art works from different geographical origins. We show here that it is British, and to a lesser extent, American referents which massively predominate amongst our national sample in general and our white British sample in particular. Moreover we show that both continental European and especially Asian, African, and South American sources are largely invisible. The absence of European contacts, traditionally those which have been lauded as the predominant focus for high culture, is especially important for the younger age groups. In the third part of the paper, we use our qualitative material to explore in greater depth how cultural contacts outside the UK were referred to. Our interest here is, in the spirit of Walter Benjamin (1973), in unpicking the auratic hold of different geographic locations in the minds of our respondents to reveal the kinds of excitements and fascination associated with different locations and to explore how respondents deal with the collapse of distance. In the fourth part of our paper we examine the theme of 'escape' in the qualitative data, and show the distinctive appeal of American cultural forms to the white British and in particular the power of either 'quirky' American culture or cultural forms which evoke a nostalgically 're-imagined' British national space. Alongside this we see a tendency for younger sections of the white British population to distance themselves from cultural forms which might more obviously represent the contemporary nation. Together these four substantive points contribute to the debates between 'cultural' and historic or ethnic accounts of national identities by revealing the extent to which the global flows of contemporary culture serve to accentuate an imagined Britishness for White Britons.

2: The geography of cultural connections: survey evidence.

Our project was concerned to examine whether Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital (1984) could be applied in the British context (see Bennett et al 2009 for an overview). The use of a survey combined with a qualitative phase to examine British tastes allowed us to engage with Bourdieu empirically and theoretically. The survey is sociology's technology for knowing 'nations' (Savage and Burrows 2007), and *Distinction* was ineluctably a *national* study, a fact which has garnered criticism about both its ignorance of the ethnic complexity of 60s France and about the limited transferability of its insight to other places (Bennett et al. 2009; Holt 1997). Our survey's deliberate engagements with both questions of ethnicity and with global culture, then, are two significant refinements to Bourdieu's approach.

It is interesting in this context to note that the concept of cultural capital, uneasily straddles national and European frames of reference, to the general exclusion of those from either the Americas or from various post-imperial landscapes. Embodied 'high' culture in the UK has historically been continental European in its definition and scope. This is true whether one focuses on the aristocratic, leisured culture of the 'Grand Tour' or that of the intellectual modernist 'avant-garde'. In the former case, the cultural canon was identified with the 'classical' civilisations of Greece and Rome, channelled through the Renaissance which was centred in Italy, and then diffusing in the Enlightenment in the 18th and 19th centuries into France, Germany and other parts of northern Europe through classical music and the romantic novel. In the latter case, the central modernist cities (apart from London) were Paris (above all), Berlin and Vienna, with lesser venues such as Trieste, Turin, Barcelona and Moscow. The exception to this Eurocentric modernist is embrace is New York (perhaps construed as the United States' honorary

European city) which was the only major modernist city to be located outside Europe. From within this framing, American culture has traditionally been identified, often disparagingly as ‘mass’ culture (Hoggart 1957), which lowers standards and spreads commercial values, whilst cultural forms from other parts of the world, though selectively incorporated through the ‘cosmopolitan’ experiences of the merchant classes, have historically been simultaneously marginalised and exoticised through ‘Orientalism’ (Said, 2003). In any case, cultural resources and their geographical spread are entwined with narratives of national identity and the symbolic imaginaries of nationhood. Given these historical patterns, what does our survey data indicate about the salience of different geographical markers in the cultural repertoire of the British today?

Table 1: Popularity of named artists/ art works, broken down by region.

Named artist or art work	**Regional location**	**Haven't heard of (%)**	**Like (%)**
Film Directors			**(would make a point of watching)**
Steven Spielberg	US	4	44
Alfred Hitchcock	US/UK	5	34
Pedro Almodovar	E	92	3
Ingmar Bergman	E	43	7
Jane Campion	'Other-World'	83	2
Mani Rathnam	'Other-World'	94	1
Books		Haven't heard of	**(have read)**
Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets (JK Rowling)	UK	4	21
Pride & Prejudice (Jane Austen)	UK	7	38
Solace of Sin (Cathryn Cookson)	UK	48	8
I know why the caged bird sings (Maya Angelou)	US	80	4
The Firm (John Grisham)	US	35	17
Madame Bovary (Flaubert)	E	60	7
Musical works		Haven't heard of	**(listened to it and liked it)**
Wonderwall (Oasis)	UK	26	49
Einstein on the Beach (Phillip Glass)	US	84	3
Symphony No 5 (Mahler)	E	53	19
Kind of Blue (Miles Davis)	US	69	13
Oops I did it again (Britney Spears)	US	22	26
Chicago (Frank Sinatra)	US	8	65
Stan (Eminem)	US	31	35
Four Seasons (Vivaldi)	E	21	56
Visual Arts		Haven't heard of	**(seen works by and liked)**
Vincent Van Gogh	E	6	67
Pablo Picasso	E	6	49
Frida Kahlo	'Other World'	88	4
JMW Turner	UK	27	51
Tracey Emin	UK	72	3
Andy Warhol	US	26	22
LS Lowry	UK	23	55

Source: CCSE data, weighted

We begin with a simple listing of the popularity of named film directors, books, musical works and artists in our national sample. Clearly, our findings are only valid for the items we examine here, although these are much more wide ranging than for other surveys. Table 1 reports on the proportion of the sample who like, or alternatively have not heard of, the various specific artistic works or artists that we inquired about in our research, which we break down by four global locations: British, American, continental European and 'other world'. We should note that our British category includes English and Scottish artists, and American only includes works or artists from the United States. We do not have the data which allows us to readily tease out the relationship between national identities within the UK (on which see Condor et al 2006).

We can see considerable specificity by cultural field in the salience of different regions of origin. In films, American directors massively predominate (though we should note Hitchcock's hybridity as an English director who made his career in Hollywood). Even though we chose relatively popular European directors, and those from other parts of the world, they have very little general salience amongst our sample. In the field of literature, by contrast, the most popular novelists were British (Jane Austen and JK Rowling), though the American thriller writer John Grisham also has a good standing, and outpaces the British romance writer, Catherine Cookson, whose work is strongly associated with North Eastern England. By contrast Gustave Flaubert, as an exemplar of the European tradition of high-culture has few devotees.[iii] Music appears to travel easiest, insofar as European, American and British musicians enjoy high recognition, and levels of popularity appear more easily explained by their genre than by any other factor, with Phillip Glass, and to a lesser extent Mahler and Miles Davis having least

popularity. The same is true in the visual arts, where we see van Gogh, closely followed by LS Lowry, JMW Turner and Pablo Picasso enjoying most popularity, but Tracey Emin and Frida Kahlo being largely unknown and even more unappreciated.

A few general conclusions can be derived from these findings. Firstly, figures from outside Europe, the US and UK do not command significant knowledge. The most strikingly unknown were the films of the Tamil Indian Mani Rathnam and the Mexican artist Frida Kahlo who was unknown by 88% of the sample. Secondly, the appeal of European influence was largely confined to the worlds of visual art and music, and there is a pattern that the older the figure is, the more popular they are (Vivaldi is more popular than Mahler, Van Gogh than Picasso, Bergman than Almodavar). American influences enjoy hegemony with respect to film directors and music. We might thus summarise our findings that cultural forms demanding linguistic competence are entirely skewed towards Anglophone referents, and although there is greater openness to European influences in music and the visual arts, this Euro-centrality may be a residue from older formations.

Of course the cultural items we chose in our survey are largely arbitrary – and there are significant and important reasons, other than those of geography or global flows which enable or allow for an artist or item to be known or otherwise (note the 72% of the sample who hadn't heard of the artist Tracey Emin, ubiquitous in the British art world and media circles). We will shortly use our qualitative material to provide other evidence on the geographical range of the white population. Before we do this, we can usefully examine how far different social and ethnic groups vary in their likelihood of appreciating art works and artists from different regions of the world.

We constructed a scale for cultural appreciation for artists and art works in each of four regions: British, European, American, and 'Other World'. Respondents who had heard of the artist or art work obtained one point, which became two points if they also liked the artist or work. In addition to the questions listed in Table 1 (which indicates how each work or artist was coded to a region), we also used questions on favourite TV programmes. To give an example, respondents who appreciated every British artist and art works could obtain a maximum score of 19; those who had not heard of any would get 0. Each of the four scales has a different maximum because of the different number of questions focusing on artists or works from different regions. We can see that the 'Other World' score only has a maximum score of 5, and for this reason this scale is not readily interpretable.

For the purposes of comparison Table 2 reports the score of each group as a percentage of the total possible score, to allow for comparison between the four scales and the various social groups. What is interesting to note here is the extent to which the scores vary by social group, so that we can explore variation in pre-dispositions to artists or works from different regions. Here we see some interesting patterns, with those for different age groups being the most noteworthy. Amongst 18-24 year olds the percentage on the American scale was 44% of items known and liked, whilst for European it was 25% and for 'Other World' it was only 8%. Amongst the over 65s, the relationship between British, American and European tastes is reversed, with British tastes dominating and the percentage on the scale for American tastes falling behind that of continental Europe. The percentage on the 'Other world' scale was lower, at 4%. We see here, then, two very different generations in terms of their cultural connections: an

older group where British, American and European references compete, but where one can detect British references dominating. This is very different from the younger group where American contacts dominate over others. Our findings are interesting in view of the arguments put forward by Back (1996) and Tyler (2004) which claim that younger whites are more questioning of national categories, and more able to borrow from 'other' ethnicities. Our findings suggest that, whilst, they do indeed score less highly in their valuing of British artists and works, and they look predominantly to American sources.

Table 2: Percentage scores on scales by socio-economic, ethnic and age-groups.

	British	*American*	*European*	*'Other' world*
professionals	56,8	41,3	44,3	8,0
Intermediate	54,2	37,9	34,3	6,0
Working class	45,8	34,2	24,3	4,0
Male	46,3	37,5	31,4	4,0
Female	53,7	35,8	39,3	8,0
White English	52,6	37,5	33,6	6,0
White British	49,5	35,8	28,6	6,0
White other	41,6	40,8	40,7	12,0
Ethnic minority	30,5	29,2	20,0	12,0
18-24	35,3	44,2	25,0	8,0
25-34	43,2	43,8	30,0	6,0
35-44	50,0	37,5	32,1	6,0
45-54	53,7	37,5	32,1	6,0
55-64	59,5	34,6	37,9	6,0
65-74	55,8	27,9	32,1	4,0
75+	52,6	23,8	30,0	4,0
No educ qualifications	48.8	30.5	22.1	3.6
GCSE, CSE, O-level, NVQ/SVQ Level 1or 2	49.8	37	29.5	4.4
RSA/OCR Higher Diploma, City & Guilds Full T	53.1	39.8	31.8	3.8
GCE A-level, Scottish Higher Grades, ONC	50.5	38.8	31.1	7
Univer/CNAA Bachelor Degr,	57.4	42.1	45.3	10

Master Deg/Ph.D./D.Phil				
Indian boost	30,0	29,2	19,3	20,0
Pakistani boost	27,4	25,0	14,3	12,0
Afro-Carribbean	30,5	37,9	21,4	12,0

Source: CCSE data, weighted

Although class differences in attitudes to cultural diversity are often emphasised, here they prove to be relatively muted. In fact the professionals score higher on every scale than the working class, and by a similar ratio. This includes references to American work and artists, so indicating that American culture is no longer (insofar as it ever was) predominantly mass, working class, culture. The slight exception to this point is that the score for European contacts is almost double amongst the professionals compared to the working class. This pattern recurs for data on education, where the university educated outscore those with lower levels of education and with a particular jump in the university educated towards familiarity with both 'Other-world' and European referents. Both these findings suggest that cosmopolitan tastes are bound up, as Bourdieu might suggest, with struggles for social status. Those who identify as White British gain high scores for British items, and demonstrate more recognition for American than European items with, again, items from the 'Other world' being marginal. The 'white other' scale, which includes Irish and other forms of European and migrants from former colonies shows an intriguing pattern, with British, American and European items all equally recognised, and with twice as many familiar 'Other world' items on average than their White British counterparts. Minority ethnic groups score lower on all the scales (apart from 'Other world'), and especially on the European and British scales. The last three rows of Table 2 unpack these scores further by using our boost sample to distinguish three different ethnic minorities: here Pakistanis score lowest on all scores, followed by

Indians, whereas Afro-Carribeans obtain the highest scores especially on the American scale (so indicating the pull of the 'Black Atlantic', Gilroy, 1993).

This data offers an important perspective to contemporary accounts of national identity, especially those concerned with the challenge to apparently settled identities wrought by emerging cultural flows. The identification, sampling and measuring of the cultural choices and preferences of white British population provides important empirical weight for theorising in this area – though, these findings need to be treated carefully. They are valuable in giving some indications of the cultural reach of different groups amongst a national random sample, but are too broad brush to allow us to tease out how ethnicity and geographical location interact and are articulated in the identities of our respondents. The most important finding, which indicates the striking decline in the salience of Eurocentric attachments amongst the national affiliations of the young, is one which we explore further in the next section.

3: Breaking the hold of continental Europe?

There is considerable interest in the extent to which the British are 'reluctant Europeans' in terms of their attitudes to the European union and more generally the 'European project' (Cinnarella 1997; Cinnarella and Hamilton 2007). Cram (2009), for instance wonders how far there is a process of 'banal Europeanism' by which at a mundane level European practices are becoming more established. We are able to address this in telling ways by looking at British cultural tastes and preferences. One of the advantages of our focus group material is that participants introduced their own references in the course of their conversations, and did not simply respond to our prompts. This more 'naturally occurring' data, therefore, gives a more powerful way of

assessing the kinds of geographical range that these groups used. Considering this evidence, across the entire social range of the white focus groups, the absence of European referents in literature and film is remarkable. There were 53 references to specific books: none of these was to any named continental European author. The one exception, the autobiography of the German *Formula One* champion Michael Schumacher, is perhaps revealing since the author is not first and foremost a writer. Of the 91 references to a named film, only 1 was to a European film (the French *Delicatessen*). Of the 16 references to film directors, only 2 were to Europeans (the Spaniard Pedro Almodovar and the Dane Lars von Trier). Of 65 references to actors, only 1 was to a figure of continental European origin. This was the Austrian-American Arnold Schwarzenegger, currently Governor of California, whose film career is closely associated with – in fact entirely located in - Hollywood. Even in the world of music, where our survey shows greater appreciation and recognition of Europeans, only seven out of the 167 references are to continental Europeans (Mozart 3; Bach 2; Beethoven; Vivaldi). Whereas contemporary British and American musicians generate intense feelings and excitements, this invariably does not extend to continental Europe.

We can also use our in-depth interviews with white respondents to consider the kind of art works and artists that individuals conjured up as being personally meaningful to them. The general pattern is similar. Out of 96 references to writers, only 4 were European (one of which is to the biography of Ingrid Bergman). Of 96 specific films that were named by our respondents, only one, *Fanny and Alexander* directed by Ingmar Bergman, was from continental Europe. Out of 111 references to musicians, there was only one reference to 'Europop' (to Abba, who famously and initially

controversially, sang only in English), and there were only 10 (all contained in 3 out of 44 interviews) references to European composers.

Rather than being sources of fascination or interest, it appears that European references are marginal, even to the lives of the professionals for whom Table 2 indicates have the greatest European reference points. Insofar as such references are salient, this is nearly always for deeply old, classical, genres, which may be valued as historical resources but are not seen as having much contemporary purchase.

What our qualitative interviews further reveal, though, is that when European or classical forms of culture are identified, they are usually treated in disparaging ways. Maria – a modern language teacher from the north of England, was an enthusiast for many artists, but she drew the line at the French writer and philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre.

> *Maria* Yeah, well I'm thinking of people like Sartre, I think sometimes they try to be so convoluted that they just end up going up their own backsides to be honest.

Ronald – a legal secretary from the English Midlands who was unusual in being a genuine devotee of classical music, reflects a persistent 'trace' of the classical, European canon of high art and literature but one he shrinks away from in favour of his 'not too heavy' brand of English classical literature. In talking about his favourite literature, he shies guiltily away from 'classical' literature as he describes his preferences,

Ronald Well modern literature. I tend to read both classic otherwise, and modern literature. So it can be any of those.

Interviewer Classics like what?

Ronald Well, you've got, nothing ridiculously heavy, you know the true old English novels, Jane Austen, Hardy, those sort of things, but I've got Herodotus to read at the moment, I haven't started it, it's on the bookshelf looking appealing at me but I haven't started it yet.

The articulation of preferences provided by our qualitative material deepens our understanding of the complex relationship between cultural preferences and national identity. The evidence of these exchanges in particular is that European reference points are no longer (insofar as they ever were) central to British cultural geography. They are not, in Benjamin's terms 'auratic'. They are familiar, 'tired', a sign of a lost world, which, like Ronald's unopened Herodotus, hang-around as half welcome guests from the distant past. If they do not constitute points of cultural excitement or fascination in the cultural construction of contemporary British identity, the next section begins to explore where these points might lie.

4: Sources of cultural fascination.

In many of our qualitative interviews, we see a strong motif which celebrates 'escape'. Such a notion is hardly a discovery – indeed it has been central in various ways to sociological and cultural studies accounts of the relationships between popular culture and everyday life. Of particular interest here, however, is the ways this escape seeks to

put Britain at a distance. It does so through an appeal to a non fixed space, yet at the same time, we can see it as under-girded by a cultural geography which involves features of difference *and* familiarity. This focuses either on an English fantasy past, or to the Anglophone parts of the world, reflecting what Gilroy (2004) has identified as a nostalgia for an imagined national past and a dissatisfaction or melancholy with a particular interpretation of the national present. Irene, a retired factory worker from the Midlands describes her preference for the American drama series of the 1980s in terms of their distance from her own life -experiences

> *Irene* Well I think we used to like *Dallas* and *The Colbys* and all that kind of thing, because it was glamorous and you know it took you out of the world, what it is today with all the beautiful clothes and you know the richness of all the oil fields.

Maria (the Sartre disliking language teacher mentioned above) contrasts her 'anti-Europeanism with two forms of decidedly *British* literary texts. On the one hand the altered Britain of the sci-fi parodist Terry Pratchett, which she describes thus,

> *Maria* For me the sci-fi part of it, it's more fantasy than sci-fi , I'm thinking of Terry Pratchett, because it's just so incredibly funny and it's drawing parallels with our world but it's set, it's - his *Discworld* it's a different world completely but there are parallels to our world jumbled up periods in time as well. A lot of it is sort of set with the decor being Tudor or Mediaeval but there'll be modern concepts or a particular thing that happened in history would be reflected in his books. And he's basically parodying it, very funny how they're written. Nearly

> every single sentence he writes is a reference to something else and the normal person just wouldn't understand half of them.

This altered, re-imagined Britain, with a quirkiness beyond the ken of 'the normal person' serves to distance Marie from parochial concerns and can be interpreted as a symbolic distancing from the reality of the national social space, though also allows the comfort of the familiarity of intertextuality. On the other hand she also describes her preference for historical detective fiction with decidedly British settings

> *Maria* I can give you for example there's the *Cadfael* ones, although I do find her writing style a little bit heavy going at times. Susannah Gregory, she does, her series are based on Matthew Bartholomew, physician, a lecturer at Cambridge in the 15th century. Her books are especially good because they sort of bring the whole world to life. Michael Jecks' books, he's set in 14th century Devon. Candice Robb, she's set in York in the 15th century and it's the whole Mediaeval period. I love history and to have something that makes you think set in that period and books that do actually bring it to life, for me it's just perfect.

Popular tastes for reading are bound up with narratives of national identity in 21st century Britain. Wright (2007), for example, considers national nostalgia as one element of the BBC's 2003 search for 'the nation's favourite book', *The Big Read*. In her study of the cultural meanings and referents of the *Harry Potter* literary franchise Cecire (2009) notes the tendency for fantasy literature to entail a 're-imagining' of an idealised Anglicised history and landscape as a means of negotiating changed conceptions of Britishness. We see this re-imagined British landscape clearly here. Such texts, which

offer escape from Britain through parodising it, or either historical or futuristic referents, might be further contemporary manifestations of what Aldridge (1995), in his study of the success of the Peter Mayle book series on Provence refers to as literary 'myths' for the English which offer the means for readers to negotiate with and ironise the altered position of the UK in the broader European, post-imperial, global context. The tension between similarity and difference they exhibit also explains the appeal of American culture. Another respondent, Cherie, a professional in the heritage industry from the North of England similarly articulates her taste in detective novels, distinguishing between the 'Miss Marple, in the library kind of thing' – a definitively English kind of text which evokes an early twentieth century imaginary of imperial but genteel forms of national life – and what she views as more sophisticated American crime fiction. This casting of American literature as sophisticated is echoed by Amy, a doctoral student and focus group participant. We can contrast her preference for the American novelist Ann Tyler's parabolic novels about 'quirky, odd people', with her hatred of the British TV drama series *Bad Girls*, which she describes as 'the pittance. It's crap TV'

We have seen in Section 3 that the white middle classes score highly on the American scale, as well as the British and European scales. Our qualitative findings do suggest a complex process of the 'gentrification' of American culture. A central feature here is the possibility of appropriating popular culture: or reclaiming what was sometimes called by our participants, 'crap TV'. Especially in the focus groups of the younger white middle classes, a central theme became that of delineating 'rubbish' and the conditions under which such 'crap' could legitimately be consumed. By identifying certain programmes as 'crap', and hence showing that one knows the rules of the game of taste,

In Bourdieu's terms, it becomes possible to watch them, in an ironic way. The noteworthy thing here, from our perspective, is that amongst the white British focus group discussants, 'crap' was consistently associated with *British* texts and forms.

Focus groups, notably those held with younger professionals, made revealing comments about their ability to reflexively define and name their viewing patterns as a means of demonstrating the sophistication of their cultural palettes whilst disavowing forms of snobbery – a narrative of 'I know it is crap and therefore I can watch it' exemplified by Geena, a Trades Union officer recruited into a focus group organised with lesbians (a group consisting entirely of young, educated professional women). Here she refers to her recent viewing of a reality TV show set in the package holiday industry,

> *Geena* I watched something like '*Club Reps: The Workers'*[iv] the other week and it was fantastic
>
> *What was fantastic about it?*
>
> *Geena* Because it could not have been further removed from my life in terms of the sort of age, orientation and geographical location and it's completely unchallenging and yeah it demands nothing of me.

By contrast, American popular culture is especially liable for *positive* appropriation. Sean, a young academic who took part in a focus group organised around young professionals remarks in relation to his own TV viewing

> *Sean* It involves constant moving between programmes, none of which I particularly enjoy! There's this wonderful moment where something like the

> *West Wing* really is on but, the rest of the time it's so often just watching crap till one in the morning because I really can't be bothered to go to bed.

Zara, a marketing officer for a midlands arts gallery recruited to a group of professionals working in the culture industries similarly refers to contemporary American drama series as essential viewing,

> *Zara* There are programmes that I absolutely can't miss otherwise somebody dies. Things like *Twenty Four* and *Six Feet Under* and the *West Wing* which I absolutely have to see

British popular culture, though, is less likely to be appropriated in this way. When asked to describe the term 'trashy TV', participants in a focus group organised with cultural professionals produce the following exchange

> *Tina: Big Brother*, unfortunately for me it's my trash soaps
> *Zara Eastenders*, oh
> *Tina* oh, it's a load of crap
> *Zara:* every time you turn the telly on it's on and you just - I don't, you know if I'm in I'll watch it, if I'm not in it doesn't bother me but - I do feel myself drawn to it and I hate it, I hate myself for it 'cos it's rubbish

The evidence here is that contemporary claims to cultural distinction appear to draw on a rendering of 'quirky' American/ Anglophone cultural forms. A fascination with TV programmes such as *Six Feet Under*, *The Sopranos*, or the *West Wing*; or the writing of

Ann Tyler or Terry Pratchett, is symptomatic of an emergent form of cultural cosmopolitanism which at one level seeks out the 'other', though it is essentially an 'other' which is congenial to the world views of the white, educated middle classes. This is especially important to understanding the cultural identities of these apparently cosmopolitan groups. For white Britons these almost-familiar referents reflect a taste-formation which re-embeds established, imperial, connections, whilst claiming a certain distance from parochial Britishness.

Conclusions

In this paper we have argued, on the basis of unusually wide ranging and detailed data on the cultural tastes and practices of a representative sample of the white British population, that we can see a re-making of British national cultural preferences. There is no simple cosmopolitan*isation* of cultural referents. Although we can identify various kinds of 'scapes' and 'cultural mobilities' which cross national boundaries, in our view, these largely serve to intensify white Anglophone identities, especially amongst the white, educated, middle classes. In the light of this evidence we propose three substantive concluding points.

Firstly, proponents of globalisation such as Roland Robertson may well be correct in claiming that people are aware of the relativity of national cultures, and the fact that their cultural forms are particularistic and exemplify certain cultural limits and boundaries. However, this awareness is in large part still premised on the mundane centrality of national cultural forms, and is hence dependent on the continued power of national cultural referents – though the strategies of distancing oneself from these

referents was important, especially to younger cohorts. What we also see is that in seeking a certain critical distance from this national culture, large numbers of white Britons are drawn to historical or futuristic parodies, or utopic settings set in places which are both distant from, and yet utterly familiar to, the British setting. It is this which explains the attraction of the 'imaginary landscape' of those former colonies of the British Empire which have significant numbers of white settlers. This is the cultural imaginary of the (post-) colonial white British.

Secondly, we have detected the weakening hold of European cultural referents. Although English language and culture historically emerged out of the European arena, and notwithstanding the UK's membership of the European Community, and the considerable amount of tourism to selected European venues, European culture - where it is referred to at all - is seen as a historical residue, not an active area of contemporary cultural engagement. No contemporary continental European figures were identified in either our focus groups or in-depth interviews as ones that conveyed cultural fascination or interest. Although canonical Europeans from the past were known, especially in the visual arts and music, these did not convey excitement or intensity. We see this as the weakening of a Eurocentric white identity and its replacement with a more Atlanticist, Anglophone version.

Finally, we need to note the sheer invisibility of cultural referents from vast areas of the world. China - and Asia in general, Africa, and South America, not to mention Eastern Europe, are 'terra incognita'. Whilst these places might be increasingly culturally visible at the level of the global academy, the random post-code sample and the broad range of focus group participants reported here suggested they have little purchase in

the white British imagination more generally. Notwithstanding Edward Said's arguments about the way that Orientalism involves the exoticised visibility of the 'other' our data indicates the mundane invisibility of the other. Our qualitative data indicate no references to, or interest in, non-Christian cultures. What we need to recognise, therefore, is that the proliferation of cultural flows is highly uneven across the globe, and tends to be based on the well known principle of 'homophily', that is to say they connect territories which are seen as being populated by 'people like us'. In our view, therefore, we need to be attentive to the way that global flows and diasporic identities, far from encouraging utopic, liberal cosmopolitan identities, actually facilitate new kinds of particularistic ethnic and national identities.

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[i] Britain was a center of the 1990s boom in talk of cosmopolitanism. Reference to 'cosmopolitan Britain' became standard speech, as in: 'Cosmopolitan Britain has emerged as one of the world's most diverse and innovative food and drink markets' It evoked sophisticated, metropolitan culture versus the non-cosmopolitan hinterlands; this was a period of renewal in the cultural and financial life of British cities with yuppies, art galleries, and startling improvement in restaurants' (Calhoun 2008: 431)

[ii] This paper draws on data produced by the research team for the ESRC project *Cultural Capital and Social Exclusion: A Critical Investigation* (Award no R000239801). The team comprised Tony Bennett (Principal Applicant), Mike Savage, Elizabeth Silva, Alan Warde (Co-Applicants), David Wright and Modesto Gayo-Cal (Research Fellows). The applicants were jointly responsible for the design of the national survey and the focus groups and household interviews that generated the quantitative and qualitative date for the project. Elizabeth Silva, assisted by David Wright, co-ordinated the analyses of the qualitative data from the focus groups and household interviews. Mike Savage and Alan Warde, assisted by Modesto Gayo-Cal, co-ordinated the analyses of the quantitative data produced by the survey. Tony Bennett was responsible for the overall direction and co-ordination of the project.

[iii] The BBCs 2003 of the 'nation's favourite' book, *The Big Read*, revealed a similar Anglophone dominance. Of the 100 books finally placed only 8 were written in a language other than English. Three of these were from South or Latin America (Two books by the Columbian Gabriel Garcia Marquez and one by the Brazilian Paulo Coelho) and only one by a contemporary European writer, the German novelist Patrick Suskind).

[iv] A British documentary series following the exploits of a team of travel reps working for a package holiday company catering for British holiday makers in Greece and Gran Canaria.

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