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978-0-521-68346-3 - The Cambridge Companion to Modern British Culture

Edited by Michael Higgins, Clarissa Smith and John Storey

Excerpt

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MICHAEL HIGGINS, CLARISSA SMITH AND JOHN STOREY

Introduction: modern British culture: tradition, diversity and criticism

What does it mean for us to study a national culture? As we will see in the pages to come, it means looking across and reflecting upon a range of the practices and activities that contribute towards the shared experience of community and ‘nation’. In part our endeavour calls upon an understanding of the various cultural and political institutions within which culture is organised and regulated, but, perhaps even more, it demands we comprehend something of the transience and excitement of everyday experience. In Britain, cultural activities are shaped by their histories and their traditions, but they also have a dynamic relationship with the present. A comprehensive account of British culture should therefore be alert to the forces that give living, thinking and playing in Britain form and character, while presenting an enthusiastic account of how this national culture changes along with the population and the world at large.

The Cambridge Companion to Modern British Culture offers just such an introduction to culture in twenty-first-century Britain. It brings together seventeen critical and insightful essays by some of the leading academics in British intellectual life. The subjects and issues the chapters cover are purposively varied, reflecting the diversity and debates that circulate in discussions of modern British culture. What emerges is a dynamic collection that brings together a number of aspects of living in and thinking about British culture. This is, therefore, a *Companion* designed to provide a fascinating and informative overview of modern British culture. However, the reader will also learn that British culture is not singular. Like most modern national cultures it is characterised by diversity and difference.

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The Companion captures this diversity in two ways. First, it includes chapters that reflect a broad range of the forms of interests, activities and pursuits that come under the rubric of ‘culture’. These include the daily practices discussed in David Crystal’s chapter on language and Clarissa Smith’s on sex. There are also examples of those activities that express the relationship between the realms of the person and the state, such as Ken Jones on education and John Street on politics. The majority of the chapters present critical overviews of individual cultural realms: Sarah Street (cinema), Patricia Waugh (fiction) and Alex Goody (poetry), Mick Mangan (theatre), Jane Arthurs (television), Valerie Reardon (art), Caroline Evans (fashion), Ellis Cashmore (sport), Sheila Whiteley (popular music) and Michael Higgins (newspapers). Second, in a manner designed to build on and complement those chapters dedicated to cultural forms and practices, the collection also explores how ‘culture’ needs to be seen within a network of difference and a hierarchy of social relations. The themes of diversity and difference highlighted by John Storey and developed in John Tomaney’s chapter on regions, as well as the chapter by Tariq Modood on ethnicity, provide critical interpretations of the various factors and mechanisms that direct contemporary British life.

Aside from its divisibility into nations, ethnicities and regions, what is also exceptional about Britain and British culture – a commonly cited point of distinction between Britain and many other Western democracies – is its retention of an informal but nevertheless pervasive system of social class. The influence of social class is easily recognisable in British culture, as David Crystal’s discussion of the link between accent, dialect and social belonging demonstrates. Of course, it is far too simplistic to draw from this that Britain has none of the characteristics of a meritocracy. Yet it remains the case that while much media coverage is devoted to those figures in British civil and civic life that come from working-class backgrounds – businessman Lord Alan Sugar and former Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott are two prominent examples of this – the higher reaches of the formidably powerful British Civil Service tend to be staffed by those educated at the medieval English universities of Oxford and Cambridge and drawn from the middle and upper classes.

However, even as aspects of British cultural life remain in place, a broader appreciation will see Britain as a state characterised by change. Indeed, those turning to contemporary Britain as an object of study may well be struck by the fact that the country is in a period of transformation, almost crisis. Much of the mass media in Britain reports on

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shifting population patterns that reflect immigration first from the former colonies of the Caribbean and South-East Asia, and then from the accession states to the European Union. The UK itself has altered its political structure, with Wales and Scotland forming devolved parliaments and establishing a relative autonomy within the British political framework. All too often, the assumption is that the very notion of 'Britain' is under threat like never before. Yet, as John Storey and Tariq Modood show, external influences have often guided the development of the British state and national sense of itself. As a collection of islands, Britain has always been and continues to be a diverse cultural mix.

The capacity of British culture as a whole to engage with a shifting social and ethnic environment is helped by a journalistic, intellectual and scholarly resolve to reflect critically on the implications of Britain's national culture and its imperial past. In an important sense, the critical traditions exemplified in this *Companion* are as integral to British culture as the artefacts and practices they describe. Indeed, in order to fully understand the political underpinnings of much of the British cultural landscape, it is important to understand this tradition of highlighting and criticising the role of culture in fostering social inequality in British culture.

Britain operates as an alliance between relatively autonomous nations. At present, the bureaucratic category of 'the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland' – the phrasing that appears on the passport of any British subject – comprises England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. This is a geographically complex arrangement. Whereas England, Scotland and Wales are on the largest island of 'Great Britain', Northern Ireland is part of the neighbouring island of Ireland along with the independent Republic of Ireland. In terms of 'state' identity, what John Storey refers to in Chapter 1 as the idea of Britain, this stems from a mixture of political alliances, including a 1707 union between the English and Scottish parliaments. Recent decades have shown how these arrangements of state are subject to rapid change. The period since 1999, for example, has seen devolved parliaments and legislative assemblies set up in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, amid discussion in both Northern Ireland and Scotland over the distribution of powers between parliaments and even the integrity of the British Union. It is important to note that while the form and extent of identification with the nations of Britain are fluid, each has maintained a coherent and viable cultural identity.

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Resilient and powerful as the national identities contained within the bureaucratic state of Britain may be, the modes of identification within Britain are not confined to the internal nations and are also expressed in keenly held regional identities within and across the composite nations.

In the opening chapter, John Storey presents a critical account of what it ‘means’ to be British. Nationality, he argues, is an important part of the networks of signification we call culture. To share a national culture is to interpret the world, to make it meaningful and to experience it as meaningful, in recognisably similar ways. Signification is, therefore, fundamental to our sense of national belonging. Britishness, like any other national identity, is a body of meanings with which we learn to identify. Moreover, it is a body of meanings that seems natural and replete with common sense. For the British traveller abroad, so-called ‘cultural shock’ may happen when his or her sense of what is ‘natural’ (i.e. British) is suddenly confronted by another nationality’s sense of what is ‘natural’, when his or her British ‘common sense’ is suddenly challenged by the ‘common sense’ of another national culture.

Since culture is bound up in regimes of influence and definition that are subject to shift, so culture itself is in continual development. This is apparent in David Crystal’s clear and convincing account of language change in contemporary Britain. As Crystal points out, languages are continually changing. There are occasions in which this change is dramatic. The Norman Conquest, for example, had an enormous impact on English spelling and vocabulary. Similarly, during the Renaissance, the number of words borrowed from other European languages more or less doubled the number of English words in use. Mostly language change is slow and generally unnoticed; however, as Crystal observes, we are now living through a period of ‘rapid and widespread language change’. Crystal’s chapter specifies what lies behind an interesting episode for language and British culture. According to Crystal, a range of diverse factors, including the social, economic and technological, have conspired to make the past two decades extremely important ones for the evolution of language in Britain.

The acceleration of change that we see in language in Britain is also reflected in education, as Ken Jones observes in his chapter on the culture of schooling. Jones also joins with Crystal in acknowledging the international influences on cultural change. Until the late twentieth century, Jones writes, school education in Britain was organised within

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clearly defined national boundaries. Over the past twenty years, however, this has changed completely, as the influences of international bodies have begun to weigh on the British school system. Jones explains how the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development – a worldwide body dedicated to the imposition of the free market – unites with the various policy initiatives of the European Union to confront British schools with the challenges of contributing to a new global ‘knowledge economy’. With particular focus on the English experience, Jones explores how education has responded to this new global policy agenda. He outlines the terms of the relationship between government and curriculum design and how this arrangement impacts upon the dominant ways of understanding the social and economic purpose of education in contemporary Britain.

In his chapter on changes in political communications, John Street also shows how cultural change in Britain is best viewed within the broader international context. In Britain, as in many other Western liberal democracies, the realm of politics appears to be drawing upon many more of the resources of popular culture than ever before. He charts this shift to the emergence in the late 1950s of television as a major tool of election campaigning. These developments in electoral strategy set in place a new industry dedicated to the refashioning of politics for a mass-media audience, and these practices of ‘marketing politics’ have subsequently spread from the exceptional periods of election time to the everyday routine of daily press briefings and policy announcements. Street discusses those perspectives that see this popularisation of politics as the contamination of the British public realm, as well as those that make the positive case that political discourse in Britain is simply being rendered more accessible. The extra factors that Street highlights, though, include the expansion of political activism amongst popular British cultural figures, such as musicians, added to an increasing media competence of the British electorate in ‘reading’ political communications in a critical way. In other words, it is arguably the case that the more that political discourse moves into the broader British cultural realm, the better equipped the electorate is to interpret the issues in their own terms.

John Tomaney’s chapter notes the marginalisation of ideas of ‘the regional’ in learned writing, and it should be clear to us that this oversight has been an unfortunate one. As Tomaney demonstrates, it is important to understand regional culture if we are to have a full

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appreciation of the variations and particularities that go into the make-up of British culture. He argues that the North cultivates a particular 'structure of feeling' based around notions of masculine forms of working-class belonging, framed within a regionally contingent sense of 'authenticity'. It is a key component of the narrative of the 'English North' that such qualities of endeavour and sincerity reside there rather than in the South. However, it has always been necessary to see these regional identities as constituents within British culture, even as they operate in an oppositional relationship to the metropolitan centre.

Sarah Street's chapter is also concerned with a sense of belonging. Dividing British cinema into thematic categories: nostalgia, youth culture, ethnicity and asylum, and place, space and identity, Street shows how recent films have explored social inequalities and notions of community using heightened realism and stylistic energy such that the films combine 'a local address with a more global sensibility', opening up British cinema to international audiences. Although the 'fairytale' existence of the privileged denizens of *Notting Hill* (dir. Roger Michell, 1999) and *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (dir. Mike Newell, 1994) remain a feature of British film, titles such as *Trainspotting* (dir. Danny Boyle, 1996), *28 Days Later* (dir. Danny Boyle, 2002), *Last Resort* (dir. Pawel Pawlikowski, 2000) and *My Son the Fanatic* (dir. Udayan Prasad, 1997) challenge any notion of an homogeneous British film culture, given that their 'environments of displacement and alienation' contrast sharply with the 'heritage' prettiness of Merchant Ivory films. Street emphasises the dynamic use of tradition in British film.

In her chapter on contemporary British fiction, Patricia Waugh explores the redrawing of the maps of British fiction and the contributions of contemporary authors, who, in their explorations of identity and the politics of gender, race, sexuality and ethnicity, have catapulted British fiction out of its inwardness and timidity. Galvanised by what Waugh describes as a 'Thatcher effect', British fiction launched its own critiques of the greed and individualism of the 1980s political scene and finally deposed the domestic novel to install new kinds of writing from the margins and from the experiences of 'the migrant'. Contemporary British fiction encompasses an impressive array of modes of storytelling from the allegorical and experimental to the traditional, but what unites much of it is a shared determination to cross 'boundaries' of convention, ethnicity and social belonging.

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Alex Goody's chapter argues that far from being an archaic form of expression, contemporary British poetry articulates a vibrant and youthful challenge to the traditional power structures of language and literature, energised, as it is, by Black British poets as well as the regional cadences of Scottish and Welsh poetry. The ambivalences of identity are central concerns of British poetry's 'hybrid voice'. Such poetry explores the many possible roots and routes of 'belonging' in contemporary Britain. This energy is also found in poetry that explores and reworks sexual and gender identifications. British poets cross multiple boundaries, of science and myth, technology and art, past and present, sensual and logic in innovative ways that challenge all claims that 'British poetry is dead'.

In his discussion of British theatre, Michael Mangan begins with the recognition that drama is widespread in Britain. Its most popular forms of exhibition are television, film and radio. Although Mangan's focus is on live theatre, he is aware that any attempt to maintain a clear division between live and recorded performance is very complicated indeed. Mangan's chapter presents a critical map of the many places where these collide and influence each other. Although live theatre may no longer be the hegemonic mode of theatrical performance it still has a significant role to play. As he explains, the immediate cultural relevance of theatre stretches back to the productions of ancient Athens, 'celebrating' and 'defining' society. In ways complementary to other realms of national cultural expression, live theatre in Britain intervenes in the social and cultural environment as well as giving it expression.

The particular role of television in what is argued to be a cultural era of abundance is discussed in Jane Arthurs' chapter. She writes that globalising forces have had a significant impact on the mixed system of public service and commercial provision that had previously defined British broadcasting. As the driving ethos behind television production changes from the Reithian 'giving the public what they need' to the more consumerist 'what they want', Arthurs tells us, television continues to occupy a role as educator and improver of the British populace. Arthurs examines the role of the citizen-consumer in relation to these changes and the rhetorical purposes this figure fulfils in debates about content, regulation and competition. Even if television's ideological role may be changing, Arthurs concludes, within institutional and regulatory debates it retains its central place as 'a window on the world'.

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Just as Arthurs emphasises the economic pressures behind the development of television policy, so it is necessary to keep sight of the relationship between even the most socially conscious cultural activities and the needs of commerce. Valerie Reardon's chapter takes a critical view on the art 'movement' credited with the reinvention of London as a significant cultural capital. In her discussion of 'young British artists' (YBAs), Reardon explores the ways in which art myths are born and their importance to individual artist's commercial success and to wider political and cultural agendas. The transition of the political scene from Thatcherite individualism to the regeneration of 'New Labour' provided a space, she argues, in which a new art avant-garde could flourish, founded, as it was, in the shared principles of publicity, opportunism and metropolitan savvy. Although the term 'YBA' spanned a very disparate group of artists, it became synonymous with the marketing of brand Britain. Reardon's chapter explores the intersections between politics and hard-nosed economics, the promulgation of notions of nationhood in the seemingly 'transcendent' sphere of the Arts.

The Britishness of British fashion, as Caroline Evans demonstrates in her chapter, is traditionally defined from outside, by American, European and Japanese consumers keen to purchase the innovative, individual and often eccentric outfits designed by names such as McQueen and Westwood. What is understood as 'British' or more often, 'English' style is a playful use of images of tradition and history as 'stylistic and iconographic indices of British identity' rather than anything solidly British. Evans argues that British fashion's strong profile and distinctive identity in the global marketplace is the result of a seemingly democratic mix of multicultural diversity, sub-cultural identities and style from the British streets, together with the creative input of its designers and retailers. Sartorial codes and styles of dress in Britain have been used to signal opposition to dominant culture, often allied with musical genres in ways that Evans suggests are peculiarly British. The class and ethnic dynamics of sub-cultural style have been essential to the development of British street styles and to the British reputation as 'more creative but less commercial than fashion in any other country'. With its further links to the British art-school tradition, fashion in Britain is eclectic and often revolutionary; even as its economic presence is comparatively small, its influence is felt across the globe.

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In his chapter on contemporary sport in Britain, Ellis Cashmore acknowledges the capacity of sport to drive changes in dominant modes of social representation and gender relations, although always in parallel with an increasingly powerful commercial ethos. Through the conduit of sport, such factors as gender, race and ethnicity temporarily cede their importance to the spectacle of individual and team excellence and to an overall national sporting interest. Yet understanding the modern history of sport in Britain involves coming to terms with an internal contradiction. As Cashmore explains, there is, on the one hand, the Corinthian ideal of amateurism, most readily associated with the upper classes and the tradition of public-school sports. According to these values, ‘competition itself was a respectful order in which players exerted themselves unsparingly’ with a view to improving the self rather than merely defeating one’s opponents. This sits in contrast with the rise of the professional players from the late nineteenth century onwards and the surrender of sport to competitiveness and business interests. Cashmore describes how sport has shifted to the very centre of British culture, in the main through its transformation from a pastime to an industry. The defining philosophy of modern sport, the demand to ‘strive for success’, has helped replace class-based authority with the force of the commercial imperative.

In any prolonged study of culture, it is easy to lose sight of the broader meaning of culture as also concerned with ordinary behaviour as much as with art and learning. In keeping with this fuller understanding of culture, Clarissa Smith explores an area of life normally excluded from collections on national culture, the nation’s sexual pleasures and behaviours. Smith’s discussion ranges across the multiple sites, political, popular and private, where sexuality is debated and practised. She does not argue for a peculiarly British sexual character but rather tries to show how, far from being a matter of personal choice or private interest, sex is of significant importance in modern British culture, a site of regulation, improvement and social engineering as well as a source of considerable angst and entertainment.

Also concentrating on the way in which popular culture is mediated, used and experienced, Sheila Whiteley’s chapter focuses on British popular music, in particular the rise and fall of Britpop in the final decade of the twentieth century. Whiteley’s analysis includes an insightful discussion of the ways in which popular music is often used to

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articulate notions of national identity and how such applications inevitably exclude as much as they include. Writing as a feminist popular musicologist, and using Glastonbury (Britain's foremost popular music festival) as a case study, Whiteley also explores the relationship between gender and genre. Her general position is to present popular music as the outcome of a negotiated series of relations of power and influence, as she teases out important aspects of the significance of popular music in contemporary Britain: the 'hidden agendas' behind its production and consumption, as well as those means of representing the self that music helps to cultivate.

Michael Higgins begins his chapter on British newspapers by acknowledging the importance of newspapers to Britain's sense of its political and cultural identity. He argues that the notion of the press as a 'fourth estate of the realm' situates the industry as representative of the British population against the institutions of power and privilege. Although the press have never lived up to the rhetoric of this demanding tradition and are currently suffering from declining print sales, Higgins argues that newspapers remain important as socio-political identifiers and as a means of reproducing established political and class-based social groupings. Higgins's argument resonates with that of John Street, such that it appears that the politics of newspapers are motivated as much by target markets as an attachment to political ideologies. Higgins suggests that these divisions in the newspaper market extend beyond the conventional one between popular and quality newspapers and include various factors of political party allegiance and identification with particular, shifting social groupings and politically significant categories.

Tariq Modood presents a compelling analysis of religious equality and secularism in multi-faith Britain. As he explains, Britain has long been a multi-faith society in which the dominant Anglican Church has had to compete with other versions of Christianity. Throughout the twentieth century, and mostly through processes of migration, significant additions to Britain's religious plurality have included Jews, Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs. Although, as Storey indicates in an earlier chapter, these patterns are at the very core of British culture and its development, Modood points to the elasticity of those discourses of prejudice that are exercised against ethnic minorities in Britain. In Modood's assessment, prejudice has the capacity to redirect itself towards various and new forms of migrant, ethnic and religious