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Gastronomic cosmopolitanism: Supermarket products in France and the United Kingdom

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we explore whether contemporary European cosmopolitanism is a deep or superficial trend. We do so by examining prepared meals in mainstream French and United Kingdom (UK) supermarket chains. First, we ask *to what extent* are foreign cultural influences present in these grocery outlets? Then, we explore *which* foreign cultural influences are present and, finally, *how* they are presented in this mainstream market setting. Our results are mixed. We find evidence of significant cultural diversity in the offerings of both French and UK supermarket chains. Supermarkets in both countries offer sizeable percentages of products from foreign countries in and outside of Europe. In addition, most of these products are presented without exoticization, suggesting a level of comfort and familiarity with the foreign gastronomic products among consumers, and a promising indicator of robust cosmopolitanism. However, the range of foreign gastronomic influences, in both countries, is both limited and stratified. We argue that this partially reflects standardizing logics and trends of globalizing consumer markets. This suggests that everyday cosmopolitanism may continue to develop in Western Europe, but will likely involve an uneven set of cultural influences.

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1. Introduction

Contemporary West European societies are considered more cosmopolitan than ever. The European Union's decades-long project of market and political integration has transformed how people of different nations interact (Fligstein, 2008). Growing percentages of their inhabitants have origins external to their country of residence and to Europe (Alba & Foner, 2015). Europeans are also more mobile within and outside of Europe and are increasingly likely to identify as 'Europeans' as opposed to citizens of their nation-state (Stoeckel, Forthcoming). Popular culture and consumer products produced in Europe have increasingly diverse influences, and foreign cultures are increasingly likely to add novel twists to otherwise commonplace products and experiences (Janssen & Peterson, 2005; Miller, 2008; Rudolph & Hillmann, 1998; Wise & Velayutham, 2009). Additionally, the circulation of the products of different cultural and consumer industries is increasingly accepted as global (Featherstone, 1990). Together, these developments have led some scholars to argue that new cosmopolitan societies are emerging, where Europeans primarily look beyond their nation-state borders and embrace broader values and norms (Beck & Grande, 2007; Fligstein, 2008).

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Despite these indicators of growing cosmopolitanism, there is also significant evidence of countervailing trends. Ideally, cosmopolitanism offers a life ethic that balances commitment to universal human values, an aptitude for worldliness, and respect for, if not embracement of, cultural differences (Appiah, 2006; Pollock, Bhabha, Breckenridge, & Chakrabarty, 2000). The cosmopolitan individual is a citizen of the world (Skrbis & Woodward, 2007). Yet in Europe, there are many signs that these philosophical ideals are not being met. For starters, some argue that cosmopolitanism values and practices are mainly concentrated among the highly-educated European elite in large urban centers or those who work for multi-national businesses (Favell, 2008; Fligstein, 2008; Mau, 2010). In addition, even if a wide range of Europeans acknowledges the importance of cosmopolitan values, their actual behaviors are more parochial and nationalistic (Calhoun, 2007; Pichler, 2008). Moreover, the global financial crisis and its aftermath, as well as recent terror events, have exacerbated backlash among both the extreme left and right toward institutions that otherwise promote cosmopolitanism (Berezin, 2015).

One of the most dramatic examples of the limits of European cosmopolitanism is the continued reluctance to accept non-European-origin immigrant groups as full and legitimate community members (Bail, 2008; Joppke, 2004; Vertovec & Wessendorf, 2010). Many Western Europeans fear that immigrants from outside of Europe have attitudes towards mainstream norms that are unacceptably conservative, even a threat (Sniderman & Hagendoorn, 2007). Many want to prevent non-European immigrants from physically displaying their cultural differences (for example via traditional clothing or religious architecture) or distorting the character of European public spaces (Carol, Helbling, & Michalowski, 2015). Concerns about immigrants from outside of Europe have even bolstered recent support for far-right political parties with extreme nationalist platforms (Berezin, 2009; Givens, 2005), which have become increasingly polarized toward anti-immigrant sentiments (Holmes, 2011).

We address two questions that arise from these simultaneous trends of European cosmopolitanism and provincialism. First, is European cosmopolitanism a deep or superficial trend? Second, to the extent that cosmopolitanism does exist, how does it structure everyday culture and practices? We respond to these questions by exploring the reach and shape of cosmopolitanism in contemporary European consumer markets. Consumer markets are often used to study cosmopolitanism, because as sites and vehicles of the fabric of everyday life, they comprise the ‘stuff’ of cultural consumption, giving symbolic value to objects of material culture (Crane & Bovone, 2006; Miller, 2012; Peterson & Kern, 1996; Prieur, Rosenlund, & Skjøtt-Larsen, 2008). Much of this research focuses on which people are more likely to express cosmopolitan identities (Meuleman & Savage, 2013; Rössel, 2015; Warde & Gayo-Cal, 2009). We take a different tack and examine products offered by large, mainstream retail chains as a way of charting the cosmopolitan European consumer market landscape. Our approach is based on two assumptions: first, that large retail chains’ product offerings are evidence of mainstream cultural consumption and, second, that consumers do not take up cosmopolitan attitudes in a straightforward or non-reflexive manner. While we extend research that uses retailing as a lens for understanding mass cultural trends (Cochoy, 2007), we do not wish to suggest that all consumers experience or respond to products similarly. People develop their own reasons for consuming products with diverse cultural origins that do not necessarily reflect openness to cosmopolitan values (Bookman, 2013; Cappelier & Johnston, 2013). Nonetheless, our focus on the availability and promotion of mass consumer products indicates general trends and allows us to avoid the trap of only examining elite cultural spaces for evidence of cosmopolitanism, such as cutting-edge restaurants (Binnie & Skeggs, 2004; Young, Diep, & Drabble, 2006).

Our empirical focus is prepared meal products in mainstream French and United Kingdom (UK) supermarket chains, guided by the following research questions. First, we ask *to what extent* are foreign cultural influences present in mainstream European grocery outlets? Broadly speaking, more products with foreign cultural influences may be more evidence for cosmopolitanism. Here we focus Beck’s concept of “banal cosmopolitanism” (2006) applied to mainstream food culture. While scholars posit that ‘exotic,’ ‘adventurous,’ or otherwise ‘omnivorous’ eating is an important 21st century means of accruing cultural capital (Johnston & Baumann, 2010; Warde & Gayo-Cal, 2009), it may also undergird the creation of cosmopolitan identities. As Beck (2003, p. 37) argues, everyday food practices can precipitate cosmopolitan consciousness among people. Second, we explore *which* foreign cultural influences are present. While recognizing that globalization practices are necessarily shaped by historical patterns and events, we posit that influences coming primarily from neighboring European countries would offer only moderate evidence of cosmopolitanism. If more global influences are present, that may be evidence of more robust cosmopolitanism. Finally, we ask *how* foreign cultures are promoted in European consumer markets. Presentations of products’ ordinariness and familiarity would be evidence of successful cosmopolitanism. Conversely, if foreign cultural influences are labeled as exotic and unfamiliar, that could indicate a lack of cosmopolitanism.

Together, these empirical questions permit us to examine how the cultural diversity of supermarket products relates to the shape and depth of European gastronomic cosmopolitanism and cultural change as it manifests in consumer markets. Scholars increasingly identify foods, cuisines, and gastronomies as rich and cognitively-accessible sources of cultural and political meaning in globalizing markets (DeSoucey, 2010; Inglis & Gimlin, 2009; Ray & Srinivas, 2012) and as aspects of cultural production that are relevant to everyday life (Inglis, 2005; Watson & Caldwell, 2005). For our purposes, mainstream food practices – supported by institutions like supermarkets – help to create and reproduce symbols and behaviors suggestive of cosmopolitan attitudes.

Scholars who have examined multicultural culinary changes in France and the UK typically focus on trends in restaurants, from high cuisine (Lane, 2014; Warde, 2009) to ethnic establishments (Cwiertka, 2005; Jamal, 1996; Pottier, 2014) to fast food (Fantasia, 1995; Wright & Annes, 2013). We focus on supermarkets as a socio-material and institutional setting where cultural assumptions translate into a different type of offering (Newman, 2013). Supermarkets are a key element of mass consumer culture in advanced industrial societies (Burch & Lawrence, 2007; Deutsch, 2010). As opposed to specialty food stores that concentrate on specific niche demographics (e.g. vegetarians, ethnic enclaves, or high-end ‘foodies’),

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