

Hipness Left Behind: White Encounters with Hip in the Early Twentieth Century

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Hipness has been a recurrent subject of interest for historians and critics of American culture, as well as a common point of reference for discussions of the appropriative dialectic of “love and theft” between white and black subcultures.[1] Scholars have approached the cultural practices concentrated around mid-century black jazz musicians from multiple angles, variously characterizing hip as a distinct style, ideology, and subculture.[2] Recently, Phil Ford has argued that hipness denoted a negative “stance” towards dominant culture, an oppositional logic that undergirded the various practices associated with hipsters. Underlying these different approaches is an assumed narrative about hip’s entrance into the white imagination. It is a commonplace that in the postwar era, white artists like Mezz Mezzrow and Jack Kerouac appropriated the worldview forged by black artists and documented in the black press of the 1930s, extrapolating what LeRoi Jones called a “general alienation” from the specific alienation experienced by black jazz musicians to lay out a radical, albeit deeply problematic, critique of Cold War American culture as psychologically repressive and creatively stifling (219).

This narrative’s predominance is not surprising.[3] Hip became a mass cultural phenomenon during this era. However, an overreliance on this narrative might obscure earlier encounters between white cultural rebels and the black cultures of resistance that nurtured hipness. After all, though hip’s etymology is uncertain, its conceptual history may stretch back to the eighteenth century.[4] Members of white subcultures likely encountered hip sensibilities before the late 1940s. An article by Tom J. Lewis titled “Get Hip” that appeared in the December 1910 issue of the *International Socialist Review* (ISR) suggests as much. Lewis was a white leftist affiliated with the Socialist Party of America (SPA). His article names “hip” as a distinct sensibility and conceptualizes it in terms that reflect contemporary scholarly understandings of hip as it would appear approximately forty years later, challenging common understandings of hip’s history and its entrance into the white imagination.

Though obscure today, Lewis was a figure of some influence in the early twentieth century. He was a well-known labor organizer and soapbox orator known to have mentored famed Industrial Workers of the World labor leader and feminist Elizabeth Gurley Flynn (Flynn 62).[5] In 1910, Lewis was a militant member of the SPA, a staunch supporter of its rank-and-file members who served on its National Committee as one of Oregon’s representatives.[6] Though “Get Hip” was a short article and the only time Lewis ever used “hip” in his political writings, given his reputation and the broad reach of the ISR, it cannot be dismissed as anomalous.[7]

In “Get Hip,” Lewis critiqued socialists who embraced reformist politics and admonished workers to adopt a militant stance, linking “hip” with revolutionary subjectivity.[8] He urged American workers to recognize that American capitalism could never be reformed, declaring that American workers were “hypnotized” by “such dope as better wages, shorter hours, three-cent car fare, reduction of taxes, and doing away with graft” (351). For Lewis, “such dope” fell short of the substantive structural change that was necessary to liberate the working class, only benefiting capitalists and their apologists, especially the craft-union oriented American Federation of Labor.[9] As he put it, “Our only hope is revolution, so let us keep manfully to our duties; avoid bunko-peddlers, saviors, hero-worshippers, and leaders. Be our own guides and continually agitate, educate, and organize on class, and not on craft, lines” (352). Here, to “get hip” was to recognize how capitalist ideology flowed through social life, dampening the demands of the working class by shoring up ineffective political strategies and tactics. For Lewis, revolutionaries were necessarily hip, possessing a perspective on social life that made revolution possible.

Lewis’s call to revolutionary action does not immediately resemble mid-century conceptions of hip, as it lacks any clear connection to the stylistic traits typically associated with the hipness of postwar black jazz musicians and the white writers infatuated with them. However, Lewis’s vision of hip shares the same logic undergirding their conception of hipness. Like later hipsters, Lewis links hip with oppositional secret knowledge. Ford argues that the senses of hipness that first appeared in the 1930s and flourished in the 1950s hinged upon what anthropologist R. Lincoln Keiser has called “game ideology.” As Ford puts it, “Game ideology is a dualistic view, a way of looking at the world divided into false appearance and true-but-unseen reality. In such a schema, knowledge is hidden, occult; truth is esoteric and available only to the initiated” (55). Black hipsters saw American society as a rigged and bankrupt “game,” but one they could “hustle” against if they knew the “score”: such was the content of their secret knowledge. They attributed such bankruptcy to white supremacy. Rather than generalize this sensibility as postwar white hipsters did, Lewis substitutes American capitalism for white supremacy, conceptualizing a version of hip formally consistent with hipsters’ game ideology. He splits the world into authentic and inauthentic spheres, linking the former with revolutionary class consciousness and the latter with capitalist apologia. Militant class-conscious workers possessed the proper knowledge. They were “hip” to the problems of capitalism and to ineffective attempts to reform it. Their “hustle” was revolutionary action.

The shared logic between Lewis’s sense of hip and later iterations of it indicates that the concept had accrued critical social valences long before scholars typically assume. Furthermore, it suggests that it was attractive to white radicals seeking a language of dissent before the postwar era. Prototypical forms of hipness can be found throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century. John Leland, for instance, finds traces of it in various cultural practices ranging from blackface minstrelsy to the work of the Lost Generation. However, the word “hip” was never used in such contexts. Lewis, in contrast, found it appropriate to describe what amounts to a colloquial version of Marxist false-consciousness theory in such terms.[10] His critical deployment of hip suggests that the word and concept already denoted an oppositional logic consistent with that which found prominence in the 1940s and 1950s.

Given what is known about hip's history, African American culture is the likely source of Lewis's invocation of it, meaning the sensibility had crystallized and circulated with such frequency that members of dissident white subcultures could adopt it. This pushes the origins of contemporary understandings of hipness back by decades and urges us to consider postwar hipness not as its debut among white audiences, but as a moment it resonated in new ways.

That is not to say a straight line can be drawn between "Get Hip" and the conceptions of it that reached mass audiences in the 1950s. Unlike Franklin Rosemont, who speculates that Lewis's text might have been the starting point for the conceptions of hip made famous by writers like Kerouac (393-6), I believe Lewis's is distinct.[11] It is a branch in the concept's genealogy, one detached from black cultural practices like jazz music and hip's traditional signifiers. Lewis's hipness, after all, emerged in a vastly different context. Appearing within the American socialist movement, it was political in a way that of the postwar era never was. Hipsters of the 1940s and 1950s famously chose to "disaffiliate," as Lawrence Lipton put it, from political institutions and ideologies of all orientations (149). Furthermore, this vision of hip never caught on. It failed: American workers did not answer Lewis's call to "get hip."

Attending to these differences opens important areas of inquiry in studies of early twentieth century cultures of radicalism. Why did Lewis's vision of hip fail to catch on? Were white socialists unwilling to adopt sensibilities linked to black communities? This is possible. The SPA was home to militant antiracists and fervent white supremacists, but the latter frequently dominated (Foner 104, Dawson 21-22). Lewis, however, was a known critic of white supremacy.[12] "Get Hip" could point to a synthesis of anti-capitalist and anti-racist critique that never took hold, though Lewis's "class first" position might have occluded a thorough appreciation of race's function in American society. It could point to a version of the "hipster" that never was, a lost opportunity for a syncretic cultural radicalism. Exploring the failure of socialists to "get hip" might clarify the relationships in the early twentieth century between whites seeking political modes of dissent and traditions of African American cultural resistance.

Attending to the longer history of hip that Lewis's article points to also challenges scholars and critics to insert the history of American radicalism into the story of hip's postwar popularization. The recognition of Lewis's emphatically political, though ultimately unpopular, vision of hip compels us to ask whether or not the turn away from conventional politics among disaffected whites in the postwar era was a precondition for their particular embrace of black argot, jazz, and the other signifiers of postwar hipness. It lets us ask why they "got hip" in a new way, adding another dimension to assessments of hip as an example of the appropriative dialectic of "love and theft" between white and black subcultures.

NOTES

1. Norman Mailer's "The White Negro: Superficial Reflections on the Hipster" (1957) is probably the most frequently cited twentieth century American example of this phenomenon. The phrase "of love and theft" is borrowed, of course, from Eric Lott's work.

2. The scholarly literature on postwar ideas of hip is extensive. Ford's recently published *Dig: Sound and Music in Hip Culture* (2013) is perhaps the most significant scholarly study of the subject. For other significant works, see Frank, Leland, MacAdams, Ross 65–101, Saul 29–96, and Szalay.
3. Journalist John Leland departs from this approach, citing Walt Whitman, blackface minstrels, Henry David Thoreau, and members of the Lost Generation as prototypical exemplars of hip sensibilities in the second and third chapters of *Hip: The History*.
4. Dizzy Gillespie, Greil Marcus, and John Leland, for instance, suggest “hip” derives from the Wolof word “hepi,” a verb meaning “to open one’s eyes. Wolof was a West African language spoken by slaves in the Southern United States in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Ford 20).
5. Flynn describes him in her autobiography: “He was a pioneer Socialist soapbox agitator —‘educated on the breakers in the coal mines,’ he said, ‘but bring on your college professors who want to debate socialism.’ It was not an empty challenge. He was a devastating opponent, his mind overflowing with facts and fast, homely illustrations. He made his living selling pest exterminators by day and ‘worked free to exterminate the pest of capitalism by night,’ he used to say. He was an able and resourceful organizer” (54). Lewis primarily worked in the American Northwest. For instance, William S. Town claimed he organized “street car men” in Duluth, Minnesota during the summer of 1912. For more on socialist activity in the northwest, see Johnson.
6. According to *The Chicago Daily News Almanac and Year-Book for 1911* and *The Chicago Daily News Almanac and Year-Book for 1912*, he served as Oregon’s representative to the National Committee of the Socialist Party through at least 1912. His commitment to rank-and-file Socialist Party members can be seen in his other contributions to *International Socialist Review*. In the monthly column “News and Views,” he contributed a short essay decrying the Party’s decision to do away with the direct election of its executive committee, declaring, “The management of the Party must be from the bottom up and not from the TOP DOWN. The voice of the rank and file must be SUPREME” (246).
7. *International Socialist Review* was the socialist periodical of note at this time. On its history, see Ruff 160-165.
8. This was a common point of debate within the Socialist Party at the time. Historian John Patrick Diggins summarizes the conflict: “The rightwing socialists believed the goals of Marx could be realized step-by-step through piecemeal changes, while the left wing held out for an almost apocalyptic leap to socialism. Hence the left wing castigated the palliative reforms sponsored by progressives claiming that socialism could not be legislated into existence until capitalism was abolished” (77). Historian John P. Enyeart explores how these conflicts unfolded among Western Workers like Lewis in “Revolution or Evolution: The Socialist Party,

Western Workers, and Law in the Progressive Era” (2003). As Allen Ruff demonstrates, the *International Socialist Review* was a frequent site of conflict between these competing factions in the American socialist movement (124).

9. The American Federation of Labor (AFL) was the most powerful labor organization in the late nineteenth century. It primarily organized skilled laborers along craft lines in attempts to secure higher wages, excluding semi-skilled, unskilled, and industrial workers. Lewis’s critique of the AFL was common: the organization frequently figured as one of the socialist movement’s primary antagonists (Diggins 64-72).

10. The word did circulate as a synonym for “understanding” in itinerate white working-class communities whose members made up the militant rank-and-filers Lewis consorted with, though such uses of it usually lacked any critical edge. For instance, it appears in George V. Hobart’s novel *Jim Hickey: A Story of the One-Night Stands* (1904), an account of the adventures of travelling performers, when the titular character asks his compatriot, “Are you hip?” (15). It also appears in a 1930 dictionary of American itinerate worker slang, where it is listed as meaning “wise, knowing” (Irwin 99).

11. Rosemont is perhaps the only writer to examine “Get Hip.”

12. As the *Proceedings of the National Congress of the Socialist Party Held at Chicago, Illinois, May 15-20, 1910* demonstrate, Lewis criticized other party members for failing to take a properly revolutionary (meaning anti-racist) stance on issues like immigration. He declared, “If that capitalists had it in their power they would exclude every Socialist on this floor from America, and we are folding right in their paths. We would exclude the undesirable races. I can’t understand it” (141). For more on this episode, see Leinenweber 5–16.

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