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16 Against hipsters, left and right

A figure of cultural elitism and social anxiety

Moritz Ege and Johannes Springer

"The workers, not the hipsters": mainstream anti-hipster populism in Germany (2016)

In this chapter, we examine the meanings and functions of the cultural figure of the hipster in the context of political populisms, especially in Germany. For that purpose, we choose an entry point that lies a few years back. After the US election in 2015, Sigmar Gabriel, then head of the German Social Democratic Party (SPD), Vice Chancellor and Minister for Economic Affairs and Energy, published a newspaper opinion piece titled "The workers, not the hipsters – why Social Democrats must change after Trump's victory" (2016). In the article, Gabriel argued that contemporary right-wing populist movements wanted to return to the hierarchical cultural ways of the 1950s. In doing so, they were able to exploit people's disappointment with growing social inequality and the increasing disconnect between political leaders and "the citizens". These, he writes, were the main reasons for the wide-spread hatred towards the elites which had come to the fore in Trump's victory in the US. Against that tendency, around the globe, parties like the social democrats had to, once again, take care of the people for whom that party had been founded 150 years ago. Gabriel declared: "If you lose workers in the rust belt, hipsters in California will not save you" (2016, p.32).

Crucially, however, Gabriel argued that what was needed to "win back" the working class was an increased attention to *cultural* questions, rather than primarily economic ones, such as redistributive policies. With all its left-populist rhetoric, in policy terms, his anti-hipster diagnosis led him to conclusions that were different from, for example, Bernie Sanders' near-successful Democratic Socialist strategy. For politicians like Gabriel, the "the workers, not hipsters" analysis supported a corporatist-centrist political position, similar to the British "Blue Labour" discourse a few years earlier.[1] Social democratic advisor Niels Heisterhagen made similar points, designating the cultural adversary as "hipsters with MacBooks" (2018). He, too, was supporting a "communitarian" corporatist political course focused on the interests and the (apparent) cultural orientations of the core, primarily male industrial workforce in, for example, the automotive industry. Numerous

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politicians, social scientists, public intellectuals and pundits echoed similar lines in the following years.[2]

In this chapter, we ask why this figure was given such prominence. What were the cultural and political preconditions that made it plausible for the hipster to take on this role of "the elite"? And what do these figurations tell us about configurations of anti-elite sentiments and their political implications in that conjuncture? These questions concern specific sociocultural and discursive situations. At the same time, cultural historians have shown that the hipster figure has been present throughout the pop-culturalisation of public and political life, beginning in English-speaking countries in the mid-20th century. So has pejorative talk about hipsters, from mild mockery of their pretentions to full-grown hipster hate. Many texts on hipsters mention the figure's negative reputation; a few focus on "hipster hate" directly (Athill, 2018; Erbacher, 2012; Ikrath, 2015; le Grand, 2021; Rabe, 2012; Stahl, 2010; Süß, 2019), without, however, centering the "elite" motif.[3] Anti-hipster sentiments grew in the US during the 2000s and 2010s. In Germany, the hipster figure first gained broader prominence around 2010.[4] It entered mainstream political rhetoric and sociocultural analysis in 2015, in the "Brexit/Trump moment". We argue that this wave of anti-hipster statements documents and contributes to broader shifts in anti-elite attitudes and rhetoric. They are indicative of a view of the social as a *cultural* figuration that has come to dominate the political scene.

In order to trace anti-hipster as anti-elite discourse, to decode its implications and to better understand its conjunctural contexts, we review some of the ways in which figuring hipsters as elites has allowed social observers to criticise cultural distinctions, practices and subjectivities that have emerged from subcultures and pop culture more broadly, situated as they are in capitalist societies with their basic structures – and fine distinctions – of social classes, gender ideologies, racial hierarchies and attributions and other contradictions. Overall, we consider "hipster" a pop-cultural, everyday ("lay") term that is shaped by "classificatory struggles" (Bourdieu, 1984, p.184) and serves a number of communicative functions. It should not be taken for an exhaustive scientific analytic/description.[5] The question therefore isn't whether the hipster really exists or not, or to whom exactly it refers, or whether the term adequately represents the people to whom it points. Rather, the analytical task is to survey the wide range of phenomena to which such labels refer and to better understand what happens when these cultural figures are used by specific actors in specific contexts to make sense of complex and contradictory social, economic, cultural and political processes.

The chapter draws on publicly available sources (newspaper articles, popular music) and observations that we gathered over the years during research projects on sub- and pop culture during field studies, primarily in Berlin, London and Chicago. We will review arguments made in the literature on the topic in recent times, and we will add some media analysis. On a theoretical level, we argue that the case of the hipster illustrates the broader importance of processes of figuration for understanding how social inequalities are culturalised.

One more time: "What was the hipster"

More than ten years ago, Mark Greif, Kathleen Ross and Dayna Tortorici asked: "What was the Hipster?" (Greif, Ross, and Tortorici, 2010). In posing this question in the past tense, they performed a hipster gesture: being one step ahead of their time. In a quasi-parody of social research, these authors – mostly literary scholars, i.e. not social scientists – defined hipsters as a "subcultural formation" (Greif, 2010b, p. viii) that has become prominent in US cities, but also, increasingly, globally, that they roughly dated as belong to the time from 1999 to 2010.[6]

The term "hipster" famously emerged in the 1940s in the subterranean world of bebop jazz, among African Americans, where it referred to the possessors of esoteric, oppositional, or countercultural knowledge. It was popularised by – primarily *white* – jazz afficionados in the 1950s, denoting a person with subcultural attitudes and knowledge. Leland points out that at the time, "to be a hipster was to be labeled a hoodlum, hooligan, faggot, n*-lover, troublemaker, derelict, slut, commie, dropout, freak" (Leland, 2004, p.38). Semantics of a revolutionary, edgy, Faustian figure were shaped in now-canonised essays like Broyard's "A Portrait of the Hipster" and Mailer's "The White Negro". In the following decades, the term "hip" remained in the vocabulary. During the 1990s and 2000s, primarily in the context of "Indie" music culture, the loose meanings associated with the term again began to coalesce around a specific cultural figure. This figure increasingly became the object of commentary and other pieces of social observation in city newspapers, blogs, films and comics. Now, hipster referred to a social type in the post-college phase, i.e. their early/mid-20s, and its aesthetics-centred, (often seemingly voluntary) low-budget lifestyle in gentrifying urban areas. It was mostly used pejoratively or ironically, seldom as self-designation. Here is one of many lists of the typical male hipster at the turn of the millennium, which Greif et al. (following earlier journalistic observers) took to be indicative of an "ironic" nostalgia of "white-ethnic", lower middle-class, suburban aesthetics and sentiments:

> trucker hats, undershirts called 'wifebeaters', worn as outwear; the aesthetic of basement rec-room pornography, flash-lit Polaroids, fake wood paneling; Pabst Blue Ribbon [cheap beer], 'porno' or 'pedophile' mustaches; aviator glasses; Americana T-shirts for church socials, et cetera; tube socks; the late albums of Johnny Cash, produced by Rick Rubin; and tattoos. *Vice* magazine … Alife … American Apparel. (Greif, 2010c, p.9)

There were hipster sub-typologies, such as the proper Indie rock hipster, the bike messenger hipster, the humanities student, the barista, the self-avowed member of the "creative class", the green hipster or the hipster rapper. Some of the signifiers of hipsterdom changed subsequently, as numerous blog and newspaper articles, memes and books of hipster observation remarked.[7] A few years later, for example, such a list would probably have included fixed-gear bikes, iPhones, or "third-wave coffee".

While the well-known narrative we have repeated here is useful enough, it also conceals a certain messiness in how the term was and is being applied: Overall, it is unclear whether "hipsters" are anything like an actual group at all. Greif (2010b, pp.9f) usefully – but also somewhat inconclusively – distinguished between three senses in which the term was being used: first, to designate a subcultural type, though one that had become increasingly dominant. Secondly, the term referred to an aesthetic pattern and corpus, "hipster culture", epitomised at the time by the films of Wes Anderson or, later, Greta Gerwig.[8] In a more general sense, "hipster" was also used to (critically) denote a larger stratum of "hip consumers" who may not embody a subcultural type in a stricter sense of the term or adhere to much of hipster culture, but signal some form of adherence to that aesthetic. Cultural analysts characterise hipsters as the epitome of late-modern cultural conundrums – such as conformist individualists (Schiermer, 2014), anti-consumerist consumers or anti-fashion fashionistas (Rüß, 2021) – but these are meanings that are often also implicit in critical everyday usages of the term.

Even if, by now, there are numerous newer studies of hipsters, including media analyses (MacDowell, 2012; Newman, 2013; McIntyre, 2016; Dorrian, 2020; le Grand, 2020, 2021), analyses of various aspects of hipster culture (among others, the contributions in Steinhoff, 2021) and academic fieldwork on hipsters from geography and sociology (Murray, 2020; Scott, 2017),[9] the basic operating principles of hipsterdom have remained constant. Similar cultural values, attitudes and dynamics are expressed by different signifiers in homological fashion.[10] Nevertheless, there have been a few shifts as well: Aside from concrete matters of consumption and taste, the hipster is now seen more strongly as the embodiment of distinction-oriented people of the new-ish middle classes in cities: "a young, trendy, highly stylized, urban, middle-class person … engaged in occupations or entrepreneurship in the creative industries" (le Grand, 2021, p.33). In that sense, the use of the term has expanded its reach, from a small subcultural typification to a larger-scale, quasi-sociological term.

Anti-elitist hipster critique in pop culture since the 1950s: a typology

Transatlantic pop music history can serve as an indicator for the evolution of anti-elite attitudes, affects and rhetoric connected to the hipster figure. Pop songs often take up newly emergent cultural matters, terms, phenomena and attitudes before more formal commentators do (see already Klapp, 1954; Hall, 1968). Furthermore, as the hipster arose within a musical subculture and expresses, at least historically, countercultural challenges to a cultural and political status quo, pop music and subcultural worlds are particularly important fields of resonance for the establishment, critique and negation of this figure. Using pop music lyrics since the 1960s as a jumping-off point, we argue that there are five basic types of critique of the hipster in pop music discourse: the square, subcultural, anti-consumerist, left-political and pop-sociological critiques. These are connected to a range of anti-elite sentiments and arguments. Their political implications have shifted considerably over the decades.

Square critique

The proponents of what we call the square critique of hipsters argue that hipsters are irresponsible, frivolous, detached from reality and even scandalous in their conspicuous disregard of dominant societal values. The square critique usually reacts to the presence of hipsters – a presence that is seen as challenging, even offensive, to the critic and her/his audience – who often defend "traditional" values and forms of life. From the beginning of this discourse, the square critique is intertwined in culture wars. In Roger Miller's (1964) country song *Squares Make the World Go Round*, for instance, the narrator draws on a dichotomy between the "square little man", who assumes responsibility for politics and society – he should be mayor or governor. This "little man" may not be glamorous, the narrator implies, "but government things can't be made do/by hipsters wearin' rope-soled shoes". Hipsters can't be trusted to get anything done responsibly – just as their light shoes are ill-suited for physical labour or projecting a respectable public persona.[11]

In cases like these, hipsters are thought to refuse to confront the serious nature of life, including political responsibility and hard work. During the 1940s and 1950s, the early decades of the hipster, the social type – as a lived subculture that was increasingly becoming represented in different media – embodied a bohemian critique of conformist ("square") ways of life, and of repressed subjectivity, not least in the realm of sexuality. In ethnographies from the time, such as Ned Polsky's (1967) work on pool hall hustlers or Howard S. Becker's (1951) study of jazz musicians, the hipsters' disdain for the squares becomes palpable. The "square critique" of hipsters therefore has a resentful structure: Hipsters look down on squares, they critique societal norms and those who adhere to them in a conformist fashion. But, hipster-haters protest, so-called "squares" are the more responsible, more realistic and moral people. Questions of lifestyle, class and labour, racial attitudes and sexuality become closely intertwined in hipster critique from the beginning.[12] The actual content of hipsters' critique of societal norms is largely ignored in texts like these.

Chronologically, this is an early form of anti-hipster figuration that is set in the Fordist era. However, it is a recurrent one, as recent examples illustrate: When, for example, German conservative politician Jens Spahn scolds international "elitist hipsters" in Berlin for "shutting themselves off from normal citizens" (2017, p.40), the square critique resonates.

Subcultural (immanent) critique

The second type, which emerges later, comes from a different position. It can be called the *subcultural critique* of hipsters: Its proponents argue, from an anti-hegemonic, anti-establishment position, that hipsters have turned counterculture, subcultural creativity and the radical nature of dissident life choices into a field of trivial distinctions and power games and into a commodity. For an illustration, we turn to a band that comes out of the 1980s

New York City hardcore scene, *Sick of It All*, who called out hipsters ("Fly-by-night scenester, Fly-by-night hipster") in their song *Who Sets the Rules* (1994) as "snobby fools, setting the rules, living in contradictions and lies". Here, hipsters are hypocritical moralists: "Living independent – what a joke, those caught dipping in a trust fund won't go broke – all this rhetoric is so hard to bear when the fool assumes a high and mighty air". Here, the scenester-hipster doesn't necessarily follow a distinct aesthetic code. Rather, the term refers to a position, an orientation and a social-psychological type that is fundamentally opposed to dominant culture and politics only in its self-image. Hipsters embody upper-class privilege, which they conceal ("caught dipping in a trust fund"), and their critics accuse them of classism. Furthermore, hipsters offend because of their orientation towards the merely fashionable *and* their desire to tell others what to do: Being "snobby", they think they are better than others. This attitude is connected, the lyrics imply, to a lack of experiences with the real world, and hence, with a general sense of the hipsters' inauthenticity ("never suffered, never paid the dues, living contradiction, live a lie oh so fashionable"). There is some overlap with the square critique of hipsters' lack of down-to-earth realism. *Sick of It All* show themselves very concerned about the scene's purity, about the sincerity and deeper conviction of its members and they are ready to police its boundaries by calling out inauthentic "fraudsters". Here, the hipsters are the children of the wealthy – the economic elite, in a basic sense – within the scene, and there is a sense that as would-be rule-setters, they are vying for cultural influence – in that subculture, but perhaps also beyond, in a world where a (broadly speaking: Post-Fordist) culturalised economy is taking shape.

In historical terms, this example comes from the years before the onset of the "hipster boom" in the late 1990s and early aughts. The speakers' own social position is that of underprivileged men with *white* working-class backgrounds who *have* paid their dues in life and in the scene over time. Their cultural position is that of purist, authenticist believers in a subculture with its oppositional meanings and values. This critique of hipsters thus has a sociological or economic and a cultural component. To some extent, hipsters are also accused of turning subcultural existence into a fashionable commodity. In more recent times, they would have been accused of "gentrifying" the scene. The anti-consumerist critique of hipsters, however, also goes beyond inner-scene distinctions and reaches into a wider post-subcultural world. Overall, the relevance of subcultural critiques of hipsters has increased in recent decades and can be found in a number of genres. Perhaps paradoxically, it appears to have greater resonance in a post-subcultural world, where subcultural aesthetics are everywhere, but their borders and a sense of commitment to subcultures seem more nebulous.[13]

Anti-consumerist critique

Staying in New York, but moving on a few years and changing musical aesthetics, the early 2000 anti-folk formation – at the time and in the place that

Greif et al. comment upon, when the hipster is also a relatively clear subcultural type – *The Moldy Peaches* (2001) sing: "See the hipsters in the park, hair so styled, clothes so dark. Prefab moulded hamburgers. I don't want a bite of yours." Here, too, hipsters fail at being authentic. Most importantly, however, they lack real individualism and creativity. They are a social type recognisable through their aesthetics, but, again, their existential failures as well: The lyrics indicate a disdain for cookie-cutter subcultural identities which can be consumed "prefab"-style and don't feature the creative, nonconformist DIY-sensibility that genres like anti-folk demand of its adherents.

In contrast to the *SOIA* example, hipsters are considered something like a scene of their own in this case, not just a fraction within a scene, reflecting the broader shift towards an Indie "hipster culture". For *The Moldy Peaches*, however, these hipsters do not seem to embody subcultural "elites". Rather, they represent a consumerist pseudo-avantgarde that – expanding a bit on this theme – embodies the neoliberalisation of youth cultures/subcultures, gentrification and a touristic gaze. The implication is that if hipsterism dominates the local scenery, true subcultures must break off from that world and build other, less consumerist worlds. The song lyrics are generally more poetic, playful and cryptic and also less class-coded than the earlier examples. In terms of sartorial, bodily and also musical aesthetics, however, it seems likely that the authors of *What Was the Hipster* would have considered *The Moldy Peaches* themselves a hipster band. Indeed, the flaneur-like practice of observing and classifying social types ("see the hipsters in the park") can itself be seen as a foundational hipster gesture. While the cultural figure had become recognisable, then, by the early 2000s, its application and boundaries remained contentious.

As the hipster aesthetic and type spread after the early 2000s, in part through consumption practices, the anti-consumerist elements became the dominant pattern of critique in anti-hipster-elite discourse. At the same time, it is important to note that the anti-consumerist and the subcultural critique of hipsters often mix. The anti-consumerist critique can be expressed by people with strong ethico-political commitments to anti-consumerism. But it is also brought forth by people who themselves live somewhat happily within a consumerist world, but have aversions against the specific, purportedly anti-consumerist, symbolically low-brow type of consumer distinction embodied by hipsters. Such critique tends to come from people invested in traditional upper-middle-class lifestyles or high fashion, for example. In its resentment against (young) people with strong moral stances, anti-consumerist critique can also take on similarities with the square critique of hipsters mentioned above.

(Left) political critique

The *(left) political critique of hipsters* is closely related to the subcultural and the anti-consumerist critique. It stresses hipsters' obsession with seemingly trivial matters of style, it laments their political harmlessness or complicity

and – in its radical forms – accuses them of treason to a political movement or "the revolution". Whereas the strictly subcultural critique defends subcultures from imposters, the left political critique claims that hipsters have replaced real politics with mere (sub)culture. In that view, hipsters are *not political* enough – even if they believe(d) in a loosely defined cultural revolution or cultural–political vanguardism.

These arguments originally emerged in the process in which "new" left political movements separated from the "old" left in Western countries during the 1950s and 1960s/1970s and contributed to the related split between "hip" countercultures (such as the hippies and punk rockers) and more straightforwardly political movements at the time, such as socialist, communist or anarchist groups, or the dissident labour movement. (Radical) left political critique of subcultures and more specifically hipsters as politically inefficient and counterproductive starts out as a move in the strategy debates within a broadly dissident, oppositional world, but it quickly turned into a wider social diagnostic and a critique of emergent social milieus or fractions of the new middle class.

The left critique of hipsters can also be brought forth as an identity-based critique – as a critique of class-based and racial privileges. In this vein, for instance, Patrice Evans accused *white* hipsters in the US of not questioning their own racial privileges and remaining complicit with structures of white supremacy from which they benefit (Evans, 2010; see also Greif, 2010a), as in gentrification processes in urban settings. Anti-gentrification discourse has often intertwined with a (left) political critique of hipsters (Friedrichs and Groß, 2021; le Grand, 2020; Myambo, 2021).

There also is a more strictly class-oriented, left-*populist* version of this political critique that scolds hipsters for being anti-majority, anti-popular or demophobic. It resonates in arguments like those of centrist social democrat Niels Heisterhagen quoted above. Left critiques of hipsters in this vein thus oscillate between a critique of distinction and consumption, a critique of "elitist" anti-popular and anti-common-people attitudes and a (cultural) defence of the really existing working class. To become a hipster, from this viewpoint, is to turn away from the majority of society that a political movement could be expected to want to represent or "win over". In its implicit or explicit cultural defence of the really-existing popular classes and their ways of life, this version of left political critique can resemble the square critique, combining economic populism with conservative views of racial and gender politics and broader matters of values and culture. If, however, a populist critique is embedded in a radical pro-popular tradition, such as the IWW in the US, the left-populist critique may also oppose racism and nationalism.

Cultural figures: What kind of thing is a hipster, theoretically speaking?

Having established this typology of anti-hipster sentiments and arguments and having highlighted the concomitant forms of anti-elite critiques, as well

as some relevant sociocultural contexts, we agree with Steinhoff that hipsters are a "nebulous cultural figuration that needs to be examined in the specific cultural, historical, economic and political context of its (re)production" (Steinhoff, 2021, p.2). But what kind of sociocultural entity are hipsters, ultimately? Is the hipster merely a stereotype prevalent in the media? Or should they also be approached as an actual group? A set of tastes and practices? Questions of this sort are among the oldest in research on subcultures. For present purposes, we want to introduce an analytical vocabulary that takes seriously theories of cultural figures and of figuration. The different meanings of "hipster" – a social type, a subculture, an aesthetic, a social theoretical problematic, or a series of critiques – should not primarily be understood as deriving from clearly distinct different phenomena "out there", but rather from different aspects of *what cultural figures are and do*: They connect and mediate between typifications, representations, social-diagnostic discourses, references to social mechanisms, labelling practices and everyday self-fashioning – an overall process we call cultural figuration, following the work of cultural anthropologists like Mary Weismantel (2001) and John Hartigan (2005).[14]

First, then, like in the early instance of square critique, "hipster" refers to a cultural figure in the sense of *a social type* or a series of related (family-resemblant) social types: "hipster" is an intersubjective mental abstraction of people with certain properties, that is, of people who look, think, behave in certain predictable ways. Some recent researchers – sociologists, anthropologists, geographers – have used "hipster" in this sense: as a descriptive or analytical term for groups whose members share certain traits and, to some extent, an overall identity. Scott, for example, professes to use "hipster as an umbrella term that is indicative of a broad subgroup within the new petite bourgeoisie – those creating cultural micro-enterprises." (Scott, 2017, p.62; see also Murray, 2020) If not considered in relation to broader processes of figuration, this type of usage tends to presuppose a form of *realism* in social theoretical terms: It assumes that these patterns exist and a set of people are "typifiable" in Alfred Schütz's classic sense of that term (Klapp, 1958; Schutz, 1962). Speaking of hipsters as a social type in this way goes a certain way. But it is neither exhaustive nor fully satisfactory. In empirical terms, it is unclear how the "type" should be defined and delineated. Is it really just about micro-entrepreneurs, as Scott claims? This seems very limited. Or do stylistic markers suffice for membership in that category, such as a haircut, bike, taste in beer or coffee? Analytically, a category that relies on such different criteria and presupposes homologies between them seems dubious. Furthermore, despite its uses, this definition tends to ignore the role of media in shaping the ideas people may have of figures like the hipster.

Second, therefore, the hipster can be seen as a figure in the sense of a *discursive construction in various forms of media and genre*. In most cases, what people "know" about hipsters derives from these representations rather than from direct experience. Being an ontologically different kind of object, these constructions do not derive straightforwardly from a faithful representation

of the related social type. Often, in the case of the hipster, these meanings are negative. Whereas the hipster-as-social-type view is usually epistemologically realist, this view tends to be constructivist – and, in contexts of social observations, is brought forth in a critical fashion, connected to analyses of those figures' social functions. Analytical terms like "folk devil" (le Grand, 2021; building on Cohen, 2011; Stahl, 2010) or "scapegoat" can be used to point out the cultural work that is done through stereotypical media figuration.

In a third and closely related sense, the hipster serves as a *diagnostic (epistemic) figure* in the context of specific narratives and meta-narratives – in discourses, be they academic in a stricter sense or not. Such figures are made to embody overarching cultural tendencies. By talking and writing about a cultural figure like the hipster, people often aim to formulate a broader diagnosis of "our times", like in Greif et al.'s diagnoses. Understanding the work performed by the hipster as a diagnostic figure requires a more interpretative, even speculative approach that highlights hidden meanings – for example, the implicit messages that are inherent in subcultural styles, such as the vintage/retro orientation of most hipster figurations since the 2000s, a major theme of later cultural analyses.[15]

The meanings associated with the hipster should also be seen in light of a fourth aspect of figuration a: the hipster as the *embodiment of a sociocultural principle or mechanism*. Since its emergence in the United States of the 1940s, "hip" has referred to something like a *modus operandi* of cultural avant-gardism outside of "legitimate" high culture. In that sense, hipsterism can be seen – in the tradition of analyses of subcultural style – as a *generative principle* of aesthetic and existential differentiation from mass society which, over time and in different places, results in different aesthetics, not always necessarily those of the people labelled "hipsters". In that sense, to be hip is to claim a cultural or aesthetically advanced status: For example, New York's New Wave impresario and Warhol companion Glenn O'Brien noted in 1987:

> To be hip [...] has been to be where it's at, pointed towards where it's all going. Hip is the posture of the futuristic elite, who are living today by tomorrow's standards, ideals and ideas. To be hip is to live in the future. Twenty minutes or more. And to be hip is to possess the attributes of the future as they are perceived from where it's at.
>
> (O'Brien 1997, quoted in Rabe, 2012, p.201)

Recent anti-hipster discourse that describes hipsterism primarily as (anti-)consumerist pretension, the self-delusion of early adopters, has its roots in meanings like these. It is also clear that hipsters, in that sense, can hardly be populists – as aesthetic vanguardists and therefore elitists, they are at least in that sense distinct from "ordinary" people.

Fifth, as a cultural figure, the hipster is also constituted through verbal *acts of labelling*. This takes place in all sorts of media and in face-to-face interactions: "you hipster", "hipsters like us", "these hipsters over there". In that sense, "hipster" is not only a type, or a construction, an element in a diagnostic

narrative, or a logic, but also a label that people use, more or less tactically and strategically, in everyday interactions, where interpersonal relationships and broader meanings ("empirically situated social identities, often identified through certain nicknames in lay discourse", le Grand, 2021, p.32) mesh. Stressing this aspect has been an important contribution of empirical, mostly ethnographic sociological and anthropological accounts of figuration. Decoding the meanings and the uses of the hipster figure as a sociocultural phenomenon requires us to figure out who calls whom what, when, where, in what context and why. As Ege (2011, 2013) has argued in regard to the "Proll" figure, which in the German context often functions as a counterpart to the hipster, such labelling contributes strongly to "classification struggles" between social groups (Bourdieu, 1984; see also le Grand, 2020). This is enacted to a significant extent within the informality of everyday life.

In each of these aspects of the figuration of hipsters, anti-elitism plays out slightly differently, but they ultimately fuse into one process of anti-elite figuration. The linkage between the hipster *as social type* – the first sense mentioned above – and the "elite" moniker depends on more or less intuitive observations about that type's "typical" position in society and (privileged) social/family background. However, these are far from self-evident, as the wide range of hipster sub-typologies in early writings on hipsters illustrates – a bike messenger or barista, for example, is unlikely to be part of a socioeconomic elite. In *media constructions* of the hipster figure, as we have seen, the association with an elite is established through connotations to cultural and social elitism (such as in song lyrics), but also through explicit references. Political discourses – such as the ones from Germany in the post-2015 conjuncture we cited in the beginning of this article – play an important role here, as articulations between groups and meanings are being established, confirmed or challenged. For example, McIntyre has shown how the right-wing press in the UK and the US associated the hipster figure and its apparent contradictions, such as anti-capitalist consumerism (2016, p.93), with the left-wing Occupy protests in New York in 2011. If the people protesting are hipsters, the articles seemed to imply, their causes cannot really be authentic and worthy. Constructing the Occupy protests as populated by hipsters, and the hipster figure as elitist, hypocritical *and* left-wing, delegitimated a radical and to some extent heterogeneous political movement. In doing so, right-wing media fought off any "homological process of identification through different fields of class relations" (McIntyre, 2016, p.94). Or, to put it slightly differently: It strategically stressed the cultural differentiation and elitism of hipsters in order to portray radical left-wing politics as anti-popular. This type of media blends into social-diagnostic narratives. Here, linkages between anti-hipsterism and anti-elitism are spelled out most directly, especially in narratives where hipsters figure as representatives of a rising/emergent social stratum, of a new upper-middle class that increasingly replaces older "elite" formations from an industrial and socially more conservative age and, crucially, is in a dominant relation towards lower social strata. The fourth sense, that of *a cultural logic or principle* (being "hip" as being ahead of others)

presents hipness as structurally elitist, which provokes counter-reactions (Tyler, 2015, p.506).

All of this helps explain why the hipster *as a cultural figure* could become diagnostically useful to so many people, but it remains somewhat general. In the last two sections of this chapter, we move from the typological overview to short, more context-specific spotlights onto examples of anti-hipsterism since the late 2000s. One case is an ethnographic snapshot on a group of teenage hip-hop practitioners in Chicago, the other one is about two rap songs from Berlin and their contexts. While the contextual differences and the types of material (ethnography vs. song lyrics analysis) bar any direct comparison, these spotlights illustrate how aspects of the cultural figure of the hipster play out in recent pop-cultural products and situations. Equally importantly, they document forms of anti-hipster, anti-elite critique that seem quite similar, but differ significantly in their political implications, even if they both express a critique of the cultural dimension of social inequality.

Hipster hate as self-defence? An ethnographic snapshot from the US, 2009

The first case stems from a phase of field research one of the authors of this chapter (Ege) did in Chicago around 2009/10. We therefore start with an ethnographic vignette. It is situated in a youth centre where Ege was doing participant observation over a period of two months. During the summer break, people between 15 and about 19 years of age who were active in hip-hop culture gathered there under the supervision of a few "old heads" of that scene who were paid by the city parks department for that purpose. The group was ethnically diverse, primarily male and almost all of them were native Chicagoans. This was a self-selected, affinity-based group whose members were working on their artistic skills. None of them came from middle or upper-class families. They came from different parts of the city to attend this programme. On intermittent days, they focused on graffiti "stylewriting", breakdance (sometimes also footwork to Chicago juke), and writing rap lyrics and spoken word poetry.

One late afternoon, a cypher for freestyle rapping formed, and people took turns on the mic. True to form, this included insulting competitors' lack of skills, their old-fashioned haircuts, cheap sneakers, fake gangsterism et cetera. Ethnic stereotypes weren't entirely taboo, but they were a touchy subject. One of the young men, Tony, a (*white*) Italian American, generally had a strong presence in the group. He was an accomplished graffiti writer, a very good talker and dresser and moved between different social scenes with ease. Rapping, however, was not his main forte. In the cypher, he became the target of an attack that was unusually sharp. Mark, who was less suave, less eloquent and less "hip" in his usual comportment, but also a much better rapper, counted off the ways in which Tony was a cultural imposter and appropriator who merely played at being into hip hop. This culminated in Mark's calling Tony a "hipster" and a "hipster-rapper" – a label that summed up these

accusations, completed by a swipe at his predilection for wearing "tight pants", a main signifier of hipsterdom at the time. Mark's diss was met with loud cheers. Tony seemed hurt. Afterwards, everyone made peace again, but there was a sense that this stuck.

Mark, who is African American, actually also sometimes wore tight pants that summer, being open to fashion trends. Clearly, such stylistic rules were far from written in stone among those young men. The protagonists of this little event remained on friendly terms and in some ways – in relation to hip hop as a shared culture – had much more in common with one another than with most of their age-group peers. It was not as if this act of labelling in a cypher battle laid bare categorical distinctions between them. Rather, the rap cypher was an opportunity to sound out social and political tensions that were usually bracketed when the group met and created its common scene, but, as the episode and the reactions showed, remained in play nevertheless. Later in the week, when the ethnographer asked Mark about the meanings of the term, he explained that hipsters were privileged people who *wanted* to be countercultural – but without committing to radical politics and without questioning themselves and their privileges. So, ultimately, they just remained consumers. Clearly, there was a serious political and cultural background to hipster critique in this case.

Other people the ethnographer met in these months who were political activists, many of them of colour, used the term in a similar way. Doing so, among other things, helped them challenge and (briefly) flip a power relationship: Usually, hipsters came into the neighbourhoods where people like Mark and, to be fair, Tony as well, had grown up. Hipster types, this was the contention, were used to having their way. Their aesthetic and moral claims to being opposed to mainstream society were ultimately pretence because they remained cultural and aesthetic. Their whiteness protected them, or at least so it seemed, from being truly excluded and from experiencing police violence. Furthermore, hipsters were usually quite judgemental about others when it came to matters of style and ethics, in which they considered themselves ahead of everybody else: The hipsters' pejorative, demeaning gaze, where everybody else is stuck in the past, can hurt. Public anti-hipster *discourse* made a difference in this context: Now that the hipster was a recognisable, pop-culturally resonant category, these people were easier to ridicule and critique, be it in the cypher or elsewhere, and it was more likely that such ridicule and critique would have resonance and be recognised. Those who would usually do the classifying, were now being classified themselves.

This, then, was an egalitarian, left-wing critique of the hipster from a minority position that became possible partly because the term had turned into a public cultural figure. It relied on many of the aspects highlighted above but re-formulated them more strongly in terms of ethnic and class identity, which to Mark (and many others) were very closely intertwined with political stances – *white* hipsters were not, as it were, sufficiently "treasonous" to whiteness. Life-world-level figuration like this relies on the different aspects of figuration processes mentioned above, but the type of anti-elite critique

that happens on this ethnographic level, "on the ground", cannot be fully deduced from media discourses alone.

Berlin 2012/14: Hipster Hass

The second case comes from the Berlin mass-market hip-hop world of the late 2000s and early 2010s, where the local anti-hipster discourse of the time[16] spawned a few tracks featuring hipster disparagement, among them popular ones like *Sido's* (2012) "Ich will mein Berlin zurück" (*I want my Berlin back* – from the "hipsters" who have taken over) and *Fler's* (2014) *Hipster Hass* (*Hipster Hatred*), respectively (on Fler, see Süß, 2019). *Sido* and *Fler*, both quite successful, were positioned at the time as *white* working-class rappers from (post-)proletarian areas of West Berlin. In his previous work, *Fler* – originally part of a roster of artists on *Aggro Berlin* records that included famous rappers with Arab or Turkish backgrounds – had presented himself as a proud *white*-ghetto nationalist wise to the ways of the "street", a "Deutscha Bad Boy" – signalling his Germanness, for instance, by using archaic-seeming *Fraktur* font on his album covers.

In both songs hipsters are seen as gentrifiers: The people who are in the process of destroying the "real", non-bourgeois city which the rappers embody. Words like gentrification are not used, however, and while political–economic processes of collective displacement underlie the stories, these matters are primarily addressed through antipathies towards specific figures and the ways of life and values they stand for. The main problems with the hipster figure in *Fler's* lyrics are to do with gender, sexuality and the aesthetics of the male body: The chorus of *Hipster Hass* is the sarcastic line "I'd like to be a hipster, but my shoulders are too broad", followed by "so you better run because the way back to Kreuzberg is far" – but really, *Fler* says, hipsters should return to where they are (supposedly) from and where they belong: wealthier, more boring German cities like Munich or Stuttgart. *Fler* raps:

> Behind our backs you're sneakily talking about chavs [*Prolls*], but you're sitting there with your legs crossed like a poof, bitch – You go to Berghain while I can't get into Cookies. Politically incorrect, it must be down to the muscles. Maskulin, we don't wear skinny jeans. I only wear Givenchy and Burberry whereas you're wearing jumpers from bands nobody knows.

The skinny vs. wide jeans trope documents the global circulation of this attribute; in this case, however, the point is that a masculine physique with broad shoulders and muscular thighs is incompatible with tight jeans.[17]

Overall, in this representation, hipsters figure as an undifferentiated group of cultural "others" that inhabits certain areas of the city. These lyrics blend a strong critique of classism that is in some ways reminiscent of the first example: Hipsters dismissively call others "chavs", the night club door policy from which they benefit bars proud working-class men like Fler, too.

More broadly speaking, *Fler's* lyrics and stylised *hexis* are based in a cultural – rather than political or economic – class-consciousness and a caricature-like, over-the-top heterosexual-masculinist politics of bodies and sexuality: The "true" Berlin body politic of broad-shouldered masculine types versus physically feminised, sexually ambiguous hipsters. True to hyperbolic form, the rappers threaten, among other things, a massacre on the *Bread and Butter*, the Berlin Fashion Week – the fashion world being stereotypically associated with attributes such as inauthentic/superficial, female and gay. At the same time, with the references to the high-end brands he and his friends wear, *Fler* highlights their own expensive and avowedly self-confidently *nouveau-riche*-tastes, which they oppose to hipsters' cheap but pretentious second-hand "homeless/hobo-style" (*Pennerstyle*) and obscure, esoteric aesthetic orientation – the implication is that while this may seem advanced to hipsters themselves, it is irrelevant to everybody else. While this stresses that hipsters' cultural power is just pretence and a temporary hype, like the rise of certain rappers, in another sense, hipsters are presented as having become more powerful figures. Fler envisions hipsters as people who control the entry points to whole cultural spheres and have managed to conquer the city, at least temporarily. In the lines quoted above, this is illustrated by nightclub door policy: The club *Cookies* that he can't get into due to his *Muckies* (an endearing term for muscles) was an In-Club for Berlin Mitte from the mid-90s onwards. It was not underground and gay as famous *Berghain* (later), but influential among the heterosexual in-scene, attracting artists, models, people from the fashion, media, creative industries. Like the decisionmakers at the *Cookies* door (more likely women than muscular bouncer-types), hipsters are able to classify and exclude others; "Prolls" or chavs are the object of this. When *Fler* reacts with physical threats, this is presented as a matter of natural self-defence to this assault on the "real" city – just like the association with being "politically incorrect". Here, too, the public circulation of the hipster label and the cultural figure affords a critique of symbolic inequality and dominance, and they allow *Fler* to demonstrate that he sees through these "neo-postmodern, tight-pants wearing aliens".

The references to the distribution of power in society are highly ambiguous in this song: Hipsters are culturally dominant, but they also lack any *real* power – they aren't the real elite, be it artistic or financial, as documented by their middling media jobs and second-hand outfits. In a sense, the lyrics imply that Fler would respect the hipsters more if they held actual power and wealth. In this context, then, the normative orientation of the anti-elite critic is not so much a sense of equality, but a "natural" state in which broad-shouldered, down-to-earth men "still" dominate the city. The music video, which by 2018 had garnered three million views on YouTube, presents *Fler* as an underground figure speaking from a car park, a subway station or cruising the hood at night, whereas the hipster is depicted as a flaneur or art connoisseur. In doing so, anti-hipster tracks like *Fler's* hark back to old rap music tropes of realness and urban charisma, illustrating the difference between the

territorialism of "the street" and the less easily visible dominance that capital exerts through cultural and financial gentrification. This class war primarily plays out as a struggle over hegemonic masculinity. The question *Fler* poses is what his well-trained body, the fact that he is good at being a heterosexual man in the sense that he sees it, his seemingly "uncultured" money and his narrative of urban roots, are worth in an urban cultural economy where hipsters seem to dominate not just night club door policy. While Fler and "street" rappers like him do speak "from below" and intend to offend middle-class tastes (including that of academics), to which (left-wing) academics shouldn't react with knee-jerk self-defence, it would be mistaken to see these rappers as populist left-wing critics in the making – *Fler's* work and public persona are in most respects right-leaning, nationalist, authoritarian, individualistic, at times social Darwinist. This includes open sexism and violence against women. The hyperbolic, but nevertheless serious masculinist aspects of Fler's critique of feminised hipsters, embody this authoritarian tendency and signal its general direction. These political implications are an important vector of recent anti-hipster as anti-elite discourse.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we turned to the hipster figure and highlighted its anti-elite dimensions. Our initial questions were how the hipster could come to take on such importance in political diagnoses from around 2016, and what cultural meanings resonated in such critiques. We then briefly introduced some of those meanings by surveying the literature on the hipster and historicised them by presenting a typology of anti-hipster critiques in pop culture and countercultures since the 1950s. Analytically, we suggested that the hipster should be seen as a cultural figure and spelled out some of the implications of that term.

The spotlights in the last two sections of this chapter were not intended to make broad claims about the overall conjuncture in the respective contexts: It would have been possible to find progressive rap artists in Berlin using the hipster figure differently and authoritarian-leaning hip-hop practitioners in Chicago. Nevertheless, building on the history of anti-hipster sentiments and arguments that we reviewed in this chapter, they illustrate important but divergent tendencies in anti-elite discourses that form around 2010, foreshadowing later usages. The first case study illustrates a progressive-egalitarian, if slightly identitarian, direction that such a critique can take: Here, the critique of hipsters is a critique of collective, undeserved privileges of a certain stratum of the urban middle class, of anti-political individualism, a consumerist lack of self-awareness and insufficient commitment to social change. The other case study attacks similar targets, speaking from a (working) class position, but it has a strong conservative-reactionary tendency in at least two senses: in regard to the politics of gender and sexuality and in its relation to broader questions of equality. By joining in anti-hipsterism as an anti-elite discourse, cultural producers and political strategists of various stripes have

attempted to activate resentments against the apparent winners of the (urban) "knowledge economy". These strategies have in turn also contributed to the hipster's prominence – up to the point where the term can serve as shorthand for election analyses.

The overall background for this is that over time, hipster critiques have become intertwined with critiques of the rising sociocultural milieus and their values, the "new petty bourgeoisie" of cultural intermediaries, as Pierre Bourdieu (1984) called them. The latter – however they are being defined in a stricter sociological sense, as a petty bourgeoisie, a "new class" or a "creative class" – are often taken to be a crucial formation of contemporary elites. It is important to recall, however, that Bourdieu had described them as a *dominated* fraction within the dominant class, removed from an actual power elite (Davies, 2016; Mills, 1956). While the rise of service and knowledge economies, the increasing dominance of startup culture and related capital factions may have shifted the scales somewhat, Bourdieu's overall observation remains apt. To equate "being against hipsters" with "being against the elite" is to articulate a culturally suggestive and evocative syllogism and to point out an important form of power, but it has its limitations. In many cases, like in Sigmar Gabriel's statements or *Fler's* lyrics, it is connected to conservative cultural and political strategies.

The critique of hipsters is indicative of a broader culturalisation of inequality and inequality discourse. This is not merely an ideological distraction. From a Cultural Studies perspective, it should be stressed that culturalisation relates to the irreducible *culturality* of inequalities, as they have again come to the fore in recent autosociobiographies and in political critiques of "classism". The actual distribution of wealth, and the overall composition of the ruling class, however, can be rendered invisible through an affective-laden focus on easily recognisable cultural figures of the supposed elites: Hipsters primarily appear as an *undeserved* elite then. In such contexts, regressive forms of cultural critique prevail.

It would also be possible to approach the topic from another angle and advocate a completely different, affirmative reading. If, normatively speaking, we see the positive elements in everything that has been denigrated in hipsters, the latter could be seen to stand for cosmopolitanism, playfulness, futurity, the critique of the status quo and a non-fundamentalist relation to gender and sexuality. Furthermore, many hipsters are arguably part of the contemporary "precariat", rather than of actual elites, and their arrogance towards others and their ways of life could at least in part be seen as motivated by the oppressive nature of those ways of life. This was the line taken, for example, by a few groups who more or less ironically gave themselves names like "Hipster Antifa" in Berlin eight or nine years ago and who were – in line with many groups within the German left – happy to remain subcultural rather than striving to become popular. Maybe this represented an innovative solution to dilemmas of the left, but more likely, it was no more than the usual strategy of affirming the less popular side of a fraught dichotomy. If, then, looking at hipsters inspires all sorts of social diagnoses, and

looking at hipster hate, as we have done, can help us make sense of the ways in which social tensions are being culturally articulated, being *for* or *against* the hipster probably is not going to help much in finding new strategies for cultural politics. Maybe the hipster's historical role has been to bring us to this point, to embody these contradictions and quandaries, and new figurations are needed to get out of the place in which we seem stuck.

Notes

1 Varieties of which have been taken by prominent left-leaning social scientists like Wolfgang Streeck and Wolfgang Merkel; see for an American right-wing version, Gutfeld, 2014. See also Beyer's chapter in this volume.
2 Conservatives jumped on board that train as well, giving anti-hipster discourse a cultural–nationalist twist. In August 2017, Jens Spahn, then a rising star of the German conservative party's right wing, complained in an interview that there were numerous bars and restaurants in Berlin where the staff spoke only English. Spahn found this distasteful and exclusionary. His main line was that "elitist hipsters are shutting themselves off from normal citizens" (2017). Spahn complained that there were areas in Berlin where a "colorful bubble has emerged where everyone feels conspicuously open to the world, but what is really being lived is a heightened form of elitist-globalised tourism. All those who can't keep up with the easyJet generation have to stay outside. For example, those Germans whose English isn't good enough. And, curiously, those immigrants who took the effort to learn the German language instead of English." While expats were a part of the problem, his ire was mainly directed at German linguistic "self-dwarfication". On the actual complexities of this issue, see Schulte, 2019: 189.
3 Many authors deduce the hipster's prominence from a larger economic and cultural constellation. As Rabe points out, the concept of the hipster as manically in the know, always ahead, implicitly became a norm in a neoliberal, entrepreneurial, post-Fordist digital economy (Rabe, 2012: 202). Dorrian (2020) makes a similar attempt by positioning the hipster in the precarious world of post-financial crisis capitalism: "Millennial hipsters are thus caught in a paradox in which they are cast as elitist if they attempt to signify difference through cultural taste, conversely, if they are to comply with the neoliberal ideologies of post-recession capitalism – which have favoured the individual entrepreneur – they are portrayed as gentrifying subjects who embody the inequalities of contemporary society" (3).
4 This began with newspaper articles (Greif, 2011; Rosen, 2009) and long-form radio features (von Lowtzow, 2009) and culminated in the Suhrkamp translation and extended version of the book by Greif et al., 2012.
5 Terms such as "hipster capitalism" (Scott, 2017) are suggestive but ultimately not particularly useful.
6 While all the contributions to the book stress that "hipster" is a pejorative term that no one unambiguously applies to themselves, Greif also noted shifting connotations: In his view, the word had "been used for insult and abuse" (Greif, 2010b, p. viii), but it was also "gaining a neutral or even positive estimation in the culture" (Greif, 2010b, p. viii).
7 See numerous online videos and booklets (Cassar and McRae, 2016; Moe, 2015; Morris and Hazeley, 2015).
8 Especially among literary and media studies scholars, "hipster culture" denotes a culture or a sensibility (lived and/or represented) that is characterised by specific affective and aesthetic categories, from detachment/cool to quirkiness (MacDowell, 2012; Newman, 2013; Steinhoff, 2021).

9 In 2014, Schiermer could still point out a gleaming

> neglect of the hipster phenomenon on the part of academic sociology. (…) There exists an immense quantity of opinions and observations on the hipster phenomenon made by journalists, bloggers and layman experts of all categories. The entry 'hipster' yields 75 million hits on Google – and thus exceeds the entry 'sociology' (73 million).
>
> (Schiermer, 2014, p. 168)

10 Periodisations abound in writings about the hipster, see, e.g. Greif's (2011) sketch of the major transformation in the aughts from the "white hipster" to the green "primitive hipster" and its entanglement with major American political crisis. For a discussion of Greif's periodisation, see Springer (2011); Springer and Dören (2016).

11 These tendencies are present in most genres. Mostly exempt seem only genres and youth cultures such as disco that appreciate what Thomas Meinecke and Eckhard Schumacher (Meinecke and Schumacher, 2012) positively describe as being central about the hipster, namely the capacity to be a performative snob, aligned with camp and artificiality.

12 Leland (2004) notes: "The church, the law, capital and mass opinion all lined up against hip, as against a disease. Voices of authority took pains to be corny. Athletes, celebrities, politicians, war heroes and civic leaders all presented their rectitude—literally, their squareness—as a bulwark against hip's sinuous slink. People who smoked a joint or loved out of hetero wedlock were labeled dope fiends or sex fiends; rhythm was considered a threat to civilization. Police narco units of the 1950s specialized in tossing jazz musicians." (13) For an account of how different contemporary culture wars play out with reference to hipsters against the background of a libertarian right, see Burns (2022).

13 The discussion about the dissolution of subcultures and the emergence of post-subcultural formations dominates research in the 1990s and 2000s (see Hesmondhalgh, 2005); the emergence of the hipster figure is intertwined in the same processes.

14 On figuration, see also Ege (2013); Ege and Wietschorke (2014).

15 Such as Reynolds, 2011.

16 See Slobodian and Sterling (2013) for an analysis of the local constellation of the sell-off of Berlin's social housing and the reinvention of the city as a destination for tourists, "digital bohemians", "expats", etc. and international capital – while local magazines like *Zitty* declared "American hipsters" and their European epigones to be the central problem. Stahl describes a similar development for Montreal's Mile-End (2010).

17 "Maskulin", aside from the obvious meaning, references one of Fler's rap crews, *Südberlin Maskulin*.

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