

# ‘What Have You Got?’

## A Theory of Hip, Part One

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Nineteenth century capitalism generated the “true believer” in laissez-faire, and gave rise to a large body of oppressed workers; the condition of which was a contradiction of the justifying principles of capitalism—the “natural rights” of Man.

In Western industrial societies (as is well known) workers and capitalists coalesced and perpetrated a conspiratorial revolution, giving rise to synthesis unexpected by social critics—the modern corporational society of profit sharing, fringe benefits, and governmental protectionism.

The critic Marx was proved right: we live today in a homogenous, relatively classless society. Even “strikes” have become a ritualized part of the game; employed to give an inevitability—(through the effects of the wage-price spiral) to the abuse of those who weren’t sublated in the beautiful, historical, dialectical *aufhebung*; the “social scum” as Marx termed the aged, the disabled, the untrained, the racially uncool, the beatniks; as well as the tenant farmers, sharecroppers, and migrant workers, who Marx described as “steeped in their rural idiocy.”

With the “revolution,” the demise of laissez-faire capitalism, and ensuing absorption of the working class a new ethic was needed to replace the bourgeois-capitalist ethic of “natural law.”

This ethic would have to be adaptable—as laissez-faire was not—to modifications in the system. It would have to be flexible enough to absorb social strains. It would have to have an appeal to the sophisticated masses of an age in which the animating symbols of ages past have become as potent as “brand-names.” Indeed, this ethic would have to generate amorality. For besides being modifiable, it would have to be capable of rendering innocuous occasional challenges made in the name of “reason” or “humanity.”

Thus arose in the West the ethic of the Cool—with roots in positivism, primal patricide, and the realization by all that the more guns, the more butter.

The essence of Cool is a cynical conformity to, and a personal exploitation of a status quo that has come to bear an hypostatic, monolithic existence; accountable neither to gods nor “natural laws,” but only to itself and the requisite for a good rate of return on investment.

To the sophisticated Cool, there are no values. Protest is illogical and dysfunctional. The extreme interdependency of the productive system generates the consensus that, since we are totally dependent on the System, we are all responsible to the System. Totally responsible not only to defend, but to maintain, to produce and procreate.

It is virtually impossible to live outside this system, and the dissenter living on the fringes of the System becomes a social pariah.

Beatniks are faggots who don’t produce, and are tolerated merely because of the residue of a bygone ethic—they are supposed to have a “natural right” to live this way.

But as the bygone ethic gradually disappears, “natural” rights and laws slowly become “civil” right and functional theories. “Natural” rights were static, but “civil” rights are a defined byproduct of the status quo.

In this situation, protest as a life-style may cease to be even a “civil” right.

We are in the process of witnessing a transformation of the right to live as one wishes—a necessary ingredient of laissez-faire capitalism—into the right to think as one wishes a necessary ingredient of technological society, which needs clever innovators who are co-operators.

The soul of Hip then is dysfunction. Defined, Hip is alienation—socio-economic as well as mental—coupled with participation in a subculture whose rituals defy the mores of the dominant society.

It is a living Protest vote; an indignant reaction to cynicism. In a world without value, Hip establishes its position by defying the concrete things and institutions that are cynically made values on the excuse of the absences of transcendental value.

Norman Mailer's romantic concept of Hip as an "existential" project is seen in its proper light. While Hip is but rebellion, and protest against it none the less does involve an initial free choice: the Great Refusal to cooperate.

Mailer's orgasmic craving is not an existential "free choice"—it is the negation of a society in which sex is a tool. And my "existential" artist friend in the East Village—his ghetto flat, unleavened bread, and exogamous sex practices—(alright in themselves) involve existential commitment only in the initial refusal. In content they are pure negation.

The System is pro-war, Hip is pro-peace. The System is contra-sex. Hip pro-sex. Society contra-narcotics. Hip pro. Society clean shaven. Hip levied and bearded.

The System is "productive" of things. Hip is "creative" of experience.

"What are you rebelling against?" "What have you got?"

—Marlon Brando in *The Wild Ones*

Nonconformists of all ages have defended human qualities against the artificialities of the System. Rousseau had his Charmettes and Thoreau his *Walden*.

But with the total interdependency of the corporational society, it is no longer possible to physically "drop out" of the system, to become a hermetic non-threat.

The Hip is faced with constant unavoidable conflict with the System he cannot escape. "We want to be free from The Man!" Blues shouts in total desperation; just before giving in to Cool in Wild Angels.

And the historical contradiction between Man and the Social System becomes explicit, and reaches its apogee in Hip.

(to be continued)

## Related

See Theory of Hip Part Two, FE #19, December 1–15, 1966.

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