

# THE AMERICAN PROSPECT

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## A Home for the Hip Hipster Bashers

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The TV show *Portlandia* is the last stand between the cool and the uncool fedora haters.

*Portlandia*, or as it's known around my place, "Stuff White People Like: The TV Show" aired its season finale on March 9, having successfully bested *Mad Men* as the show whose impact on the cultural discourse furthest outstrips its ratings. The kind of people who pen magazine articles defining the culture's official watercooler topics spring directly from the educated, anxiously hip urban middle class that *Portlandia* captures so perfectly, giving it a massive edge in this contest. Beyond just being an entertaining black hole of self-referential humor, however, *Portlandia* signals an important shift in the zeitgeist. By replacing once-fashionable hipster-bashing with warm-hearted humor about hipsters, for hipsters, *Portlandia* suggests that finally, a decade after it became cool, hipster-bashing is square yet again. It's once more hip to be hip, so long as you have a sense of humor about it.

To be clear, Fred Armisen and Carrie Brownstein, the creators and lead actors of *Portlandia*, target plenty among the ranks of the non-hip in their sketches about life in Portland, Oregon. They take particular delight in taking on overanxious yuppies, middle-aged squares, and granola-crunching second-wave feminists. But the show is at its funniest when it chronicles the various stripes of cool-hunting in the urban middle class. The show gets that the people who obsess about cocktail culture aren't necessarily the same people who hang out in punk-rock bars, but that they all get bundled under the label "hipster" for a reason. As Armisen and Brownstein have repeatedly said in interviews, they marinate in the very culture they're satirizing, and their affection for their characters shines through.

*Portlandia* functions, therefore, as a barometer of the hip factor it mocks; not grasping the loving attitude the show has toward its subjects signals that you are most certainly not "with it." Hearing someone reference the show to negatively characterize a behavior, whether it's organic-food snobbery or picking up DJ-ing as a hobby, causes my internal snob to flinch. Even *New York Magazine* fell into the trap, **describing a fancy but cheap coffee shop** as "sounds like a *Portlandia* parody, but we're not ashamed to admit that we like it," a phrasing that suggests that shame should attend those moments of feeling like you're a character in *Portlandia*. Of course, this embarrassment on the behalf of those who don't really get it had its moment on *Portlandia*, when a character played by Brownstein found herself unable to overcome a date's affection for Pearl Jam.

About a decade ago, hipster-bashing was strictly the province of those who considered themselves truly hip—they were, after all, the only people who could be reliably called upon to know a hipster when they saw one. Hipster-bashing had a weird internal logic: While it reflected a strange obsession among the tastemaker class with establishing authenticity, it attacked the very obsession itself. "That person tries really hard to be cool," the hipster-basher was trying to say, "but baby, I'm so cool I don't even have to try." Back then, if someone sneered at the stupid hipsters, you could guarantee with near certainty that this person lived in a hip neighborhood in a fashionable city, and odds were that she was in a band.

But as with many trends, hipster-bashing spread to the general population, turning the trend into an imitation of itself. Now hipster-bashing is indistinguishable from the jealousy-tinged bile that's always been spewed at hep cats, jazz babies, greasers, hippies, and "liberal elitists." In the past couple of years, someone sneering at hipsters needn't have any relationship to the culture of cool, and increasingly votes Republican. This became especially evident after Orrin Hatch described Obama as someone sporting a "hipster fedora and a double skim latte." Once the privilege of the so-called liberal elite, hipster-bashing now is about as sexy as wearing a kitten-adorned sweater vest unironically.

Luckily, the path laid out by *Portlandia* gives the cool kids a strategy for being hip without looking like you worry too much about it. Now you can simply acknowledge your hipster status while having a laugh about it, demonstrating that you don't actually take yourself that seriously. The best part is that this strategy passes the all-important authenticity sniff test. *Portlandia*, like "Stuff White People Like," is genuinely funny. The sketches this season that made me laugh the hardest were the ones I saw myself in, such as the charming couple that goes out of their way to use the mysterious fruit included in their local farm-raised weekly shipment. Or the non-sci-fi fans who find themselves obsessed with "Battlestar Galactica." Or the woman who still makes mixes on actual cassette tapes, in a spasm of Gen X nostalgia.

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