

**THE HERMENEUTICS OF SUSPICION
AND THE CORRUPTION OF THE LIBERAL MIND**

A Review of Rita Felski's *The Limits of Critique*

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“What is the difference between leftists and cannibals?”

“Cannibals don't eat their friends.”

Attributed to Lyndon Johnson

How we feel is almost always the first signal we have about the nature of the environment in which we find ourselves. Although few in western cultures overtly acknowledge it, all of us utilize this capacity every day of our lives.

All of us have had the experience of walking into a new restaurant with a friend; all of us engage in some form of the following when we do. We stop just inside, pause a moment, and get a feel for the place. And everyone of us has, at one time or another, turned to our friend and said, “This place feels weird, let's leave.”

We do the same thing at conferences. We stop inside the door of the room and look around. We get a feel for the place and adjust our internal world accordingly. Then we look at the seating and placement of chairs. Where do we want to sit? By that person, oh, holy hell, no. How about over there? Eventually one place in the room seems to feel more convivial, we find our seat and settle ourselves into it. We feel, to greater or lesser extent, a sense of safety and comfort in that location though the process by which we do that rarely rises to conscious thought.

And to extend this a bit further, we sense the meanings within musical notes through our capacity to feel (this is, in fact, the root of the aesthetic sense). The meanings within the melody thread of a song as well as other structures inside a musical composition are sensately felt as a complex of emotional tones. Exploring those emotional tone complexes allows us, if we wish, to consciously explore the underlying meanings within the song, though of course, finding language to hold what we discover is often very challenging. Music captures meanings that bypass the intellectual mind, meanings that are, except for gifted poets, extremely hard to capture in words. As Gustav Mahler once said, “If a composer could say what he had to say in words he would not bother trying to say it in music.”

I am talking at some length about this because it has a great deal of relevance to the current difficulties within my liberal tribe. This type of “feeling” is our sensate perception of what might be called the atmosphere of a place or as Rita Felski puts it in her book *The Limits of Critique* (University of Chicago Press, 2015) its “mood.”

I believe that much of the discomfort of those of us struggling to articulate informed responses to critical race theory, political correctness, and intersectionalism begins initially, as it did for me, as a strong, preverbal aversion to the mood they possess. As the writer Thomas Cook once remarked, “There are moral fault lines to whose subtle trembling we must remain alert.” That subtle trembling is what initially captures our attention but it takes time to unlock the reasons why it has occurred. And because the problems within extremist liberal thinking are often so subtle it takes time and a great deal of contemplation and sophisticated parsing to unlock those reasons, then to find the words to communicate what we have found.

Felski has spent years in such contemplation and she is adept in communicating what she

has discovered. While she begins the book with a focus on the dynamics of critique in literature, as the book progresses she extends it to much of our social world, including, crucially, such things as queer theory and critical race theory.

Felski makes a seminal point early in the book that the mental orientations of the purveyors of critique, whatever its focus, are not as rational as they present themselves to be but, importantly, that their theoretical descriptions of reality possesses a mood, an atmosphere, an overall feeling. It is not the sort of mood or atmosphere that belongs to a specific place or song but one that is interwoven throughout a particular mindset or orientation toward the world around us. That mood, as Felski reveals, is root to the expression of critique whatever its focus, and is in fact the genesis for the form it currently takes.

With great sophistication, subtly, and surgical precision she then proceeds to unlock the dynamics of that mood, its effects on human experience, the deeper meanings and beliefs that lie concealed within the atmosphere that belongs to critical theory, and just how subtle and pervasive its effects on behavior can be. She begins carefully, first defining just what the word “mood” itself means:

Mood, as discussed by Heidegger and others, refers to to an overall atmosphere or climate that causes the world to come into view in a certain way. Moods are often ambient, diffuse, and hazy, part of the background rather than the foreground of thought. In contrast to the suddenness of and intensity of the passions, they are characterized by a degree of stability: a mood can be pervasive, lingering, slow to change. It “sets the tone” for our engagement with

the world, causing it to appear to us in a given light.

She then extends this to literary studies:

There is more going on in literary studies than theoretical debates, political disputes, and close readings. Whether our overall mood is ironic or irenic, generous or guarded, strenuous or languorous, will influence how we position ourselves in relation to the texts we encounter and what strikes us as most salient. Critical detachment is not an absence of mood but one manifestation of it, casting a certain shadow over its object. It colors the texts we read, endows them with certain qualities, places them in a given light. A certain disposition takes shape: guardedness rather than openness, aggression rather than submission, irony rather than reverence, exposure rather than tact. . . . Like any other repeated practice, it eases into the state of second nature, no longer an alien or obtrusive activity but a recognizable and reassuring rhythm of thought. Critique inhabits us, and we become inhabited to critique.

“The idea of critique,” she continues,

contains various hues and shades of meaning but its key elements include following a spirit of skeptical questioning or outright condemnation, an emphasis on its precarious position vis-a-vis overbearing and oppressive social forces, the

claim to be engaged in some kind of radical intellectual and/or political work, and the assumption that whatever is not critical must therefore be uncritical. . . . These practices combine, in differing ways, an attitude of vigilance, detachment, and wariness . . .

Literary critique, as she says, has its roots in “*suspicious* interpretation.” The proponents of critique, whether literary or cultural, generally assume a stance of detachment, as if their observations are merely an objective analysis of external conditions. But this “detachment,” is, she comments, “not an absence of mood but one manifestation of it – a certain orientation toward one’s subject, a way of making one’s argument matter. It is tied to the cultivation of an intellectual persona that is highly prized in literary studies and beyond: suspicious, knowing, self-conscious, hardheaded, tirelessly vigilant.” These “character traits such as nonchalance, arrogance, or sentimentality [are] styles of thought [and] play a decisive part in intellectual debate, even though these components are rarely given their due.” They are all part of what she rightfully recognizes as the pervasive “mood” of every form of critical theory.

That she begins by focusing on literary studies doesn’t limit the relevance of her insights. The mood she describes, as she later reveals, is culturally widespread. The suspicious reading of text now applies to anything and everything which appears in any medium as well as to any statement or comment anyone might make. She observes that we’ve become “soaked in an overall tonal atmosphere that is very hard to change.” Moreover, it has become so accepted as the natural state of things that it is now exceptionally difficult to point it out as problematical. To a fish water just is. As she goes on to say, “Moods, in this sense, muddy the distinction between

inside and outside, self and world. They often seem larger than our individual selves; they envelop and surround us, as if coming from elsewhere. We find ourselves in moods that have already been inhabited by others.”

Many liberals now live inside a reality frame that others, who care little for our personal, cultural, or democratic well being, have created. As Doris Lessing once noted (in her article “Political Correctness”), while this kind of social critique does have its good side (“*for it makes us re-examine attitudes, and that is always useful.*”)

The trouble is that, with all popular movements, the lunatic fringe so quickly ceases to be a fringe, the tail begins to wag the dog. For every woman or man who is quietly and sensibly using the idea to examine our assumptions, there are 20 rabble-rousers whose real motive is desire for power over others, no less rabble-rousers because they see themselves as anti-racists or feminists or whatever.

One of the great weaknesses within my liberal tribe is that while they can easily see the dangers within non-liberal political or social movements, they cannot see them within their own. In general, they have little understanding of the human drive for power over others that exists, to one extent or another, within most human beings or that many of their colleagues have simply assumed protective coloration in order to achieve that power. One of the real contributions of Felski’s book is that she illuminates the truth that our sensate perception of the mood or atmosphere permeating the words and behaviors we encounter is the key to our understanding of

the meanings within them. And more, it enables us to perceive the underlying frame of reference, the internal orientation, of the people engaging in those behaviors or uttering those words.

Felski notes that she “appropriates” Paul Ricoeur’s phrase “The Hermeneutics of Suspicion” to describe the mood which she feels underlies all contemporary critical theory and which, through concept creep, has come to permeate much of western liberal thought. In many respects it has come to define the mindset a “true” liberal must have toward the social and political structures which surround us. “Radicalism of thought,” she says,

now calls for intensive acts of deciphering, thanks to a heightened sense of the duplicity of language and the uncertain links between signs and meaning. Their aim is not just to underscore the unreliability of knowledge – a theme amply mined by previous generations of philosophers. Rather these thinkers instantiate a new suspicion of motives – of the ubiquity of deception and self-deception.

As she continues:

rather than giving up interpretation, critics are practicing it ever more fervently and furiously, thanks to the spread of poststructuralist theories that school them in preternatural alertness and vigilance. The unreliability of signs secures the permanence of suspicion: no longer a temporary way station on the path to a newly discovered truth, it is a permanent domicile and dwelling place for criticism This entrenching of suspicion in turn intensifies the impulse to

decipher and decode. The suspicious person is sharp-eyed and hyperalert; mistrustful of appearances, fearful of being duped, she is always on the lookout for concealed threats of discredited motives. In short: more suspicion means ever more interpretation.

Suspicion is, as she notes, at the root of critique, critical theory, and their offspring such as queer theory, critical race theory, and intersectionalism. It has an overall mood, tone, texture, feel; it is the water in which all of us now swim, the air which we breathe. And as she noted earlier such a pervasive mood “*causes the world to come into view in a certain way.*” We take on a certain orientation of self, begin to see all human behavior and activity outside ourselves as inherently suspicious.

This extension of the suspicious mind has begun to trouble increasing numbers of people, including some of those who were responsible to its extension into disparate fields. This is true of Feliski herself in reviewing her work in feminist theory and others such as Eve Sedgwick, an early proponent and developer of queer theory. As Feliski relates:

Sedgwick wonders at the ease with which suspicious reading has settled into a mandatory method rather than one approach among others. Increasingly prescriptive as well as excruciatingly predictable, its effects can be stultifying, pushing thought down predetermined paths and closing our minds to the play of detail, nuance, quirkiness, contradiction, happenstance. Knowing full well that all-powerful forces are working behind the scenes, the critic conjures up ever

more paralyzing scenarios of correction and control. Like the clinically paranoid individual, she feeds off the charge of her own negativity, taking comfort in her clear-eyed refusal of hope and her stoic awareness of connections and consequences invisible to others. Contemporary critique thus functions as a “strong theory” of explanation, interpretation, and prediction. In its exclusion of contingency and indifference to counterexample, it shades into tireless tautology, rediscovering the truth of its bleak prognoses over and over again.

As well as anything I have read, this sums up what we see playing out in the world around us: the extension of suspicious reading of motives to anyone and everyone and literally everything they do, from the words they speak, to their body language, to the way they dress, to their hair, the music they play, the art they create, or even how they prepare food.

The mindset underlying all this is, as Felski rightly notes, actively rejects any acceptance of the face value of communication, whether literary or social; holds nothing as innocent of power motivations, whether directly or through unconscious complicity in the power motivations of others. Throughout runs an ideological certitude of personal clarity of perception and one’s own moral rightness.

To regard the majority of western people’s (and all Caucasians and men) as possessing malign motives; to base a life upon such a point of view; to approach all books, plays, art, and human interactions with this kind of suspicion is not, however, a sign of clear-eyed perception but rather, as one of my psychology professors put it, a diseased mind. For it rejects as real any aspect of our humanness that is not oriented around power over others, whether explicit or

implicit. As it becomes the dominant view of the world, by its nature it becomes self-perpetuating; the more suspicious one is the more vigilant one becomes. And the more vigilant one is, the more evidence one finds in even the most innocent of behaviors. The more evidence one finds, the more vigilant one becomes.

The great contribution of Felski's book is her identification that the mindset permeating the liberal world at present possesses a specific mood that itself gives rise to ever more suspicion. That in and of itself enables those of us who struggle to create alternatives to root what we do in approaches that possess a significantly different, and more life-enhancing, one. One that does not, by its nature, splinter community and destroy the possibility of dialogue, but rather enhances them.

There is much more to her book of course. Her identification of the suspicious mood merely sets the foundation for her further explorations, specifically into the question of why has this mood among all possible moods taken hold as the de facto sensible choice for so many liberals? In later sections of the book she explores its root in what she calls philosophical suspicion which has, over time, extended itself into what she terms academic suspicion, then literary suspicion, and finally vernacular suspicion, that is its commonality among the rest of us. She then explores vernacular suspicion in depth and finally explores a different kind of Hermeneutics that is at its heart not destructive but redemptive. These final three aspects of her book are explored in the companion articles to this one.

Felski is, by the way, poignantly aware of the irony in exploring, and finding the faults within, the hidden dynamics that underlie a critical approach which is itself oriented around the hidden dynamics of others (while ignoring its own). But there is one significant difference

between what she does here and what critical theory itself does.

She, unlike the proponents of critical theory, still finds critical theory useful – though in much more limited circumstances. Further, as she makes clear, while critical theory as it is now practiced is useful for some of the insights it uncovers its primary outcome, when applied as an overall approach to life, is destructive. It offers no constructive solutions to the problems it perceives. It possesses within itself no, as she terms it, hermeneutics of reparation or redemption, of hope or love, of compassion or forgiveness. It can tear apart but it cannot rebuild on a better foundation. For critical theory at its core it denies the existence of any human motivations in those with whom it disagrees other than unconscious complicity in power over others or the drive for power itself. It is a binary, either/or view of human beings and denies the complexity of the human heart.

In that brief paragraph, I suspect you felt the nature of the mood that Felski speaks of that weaves itself through the entire body of critical theory and its proponents. Simply by speaking of reparation, redemption, hope, love, compassion, forgiveness some element of those aspects of our humanity arose in your memory and feelings. They all have a commonality of feeling, of mood or atmosphere. And in their movements within you an immediate contrast occurred between their mood and the one that lives within the suspicious mindset of critical theory.

The moral fault line that Thomas Cook speaks of runs through the center of the human heart. Its trembling can only be found through subtle distinctions in feeling. And as always those distinctions are found by contrast. True liberalism is not founded in a dissociated rationalism that utilizes a disembodied theoretical structure to understand the world and our place in it. It is found through depth of thought, in personal exploration of the nuanced complexity of our humanness,

in the development of our redemptive capacities, in humility, in the rectification of the historical amnesia that afflicts the western world, in a refusal for blind acceptance of any dogma – even ones close to our hearts, in our capacity to love and forgive.

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I first felt that subtle trembling a half century ago but have felt it more often and with greater impact as the ideologues of the left have gained more purchase on the liberal mind, and have begun to dominate the dialogue. As Doris Lessing, in her article “Language and the Lunatic Fringe,” noted

The failure of liberals to understand that many of the most vocal actors on the left are not genuinely interested in social justice has allowed their world view to be hijacked by those whose underlying desire is solely for the accumulation of power. The question for me is why?

While there are a great many factors involved, from cowardice to the historical amnesia common among both liberals and the young to a general unwillingness to think deeply about complex moral questions to failures of character to the deep-seated desire to be seen as morally pure, I think that Rita Felski has done more to unlock the subtle dynamics involved than anyone else.

