

NEW WOMAN CRITICS AND THE “CRISIS OF CULTURE” BETWEEN THE WORLD WARS

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INTRODUCTION

Throughout the 20th-century, professional cultural criticism—in other words, the process by which public intellectuals canonized works of art—was practiced by many. The interwar period was one defined by a crisis of culture, as professional intellectuals grappled with the rise of mass-media. Work by public intellectuals such as I. A. Richards and F. R. Leavis sought to respond to and engage with a culture perceived as declining. Historical narratives of interwar cultural criticism have tended to undervalue the contributions of female critics, such as those of Q. D. Leavis, author of *Fiction and the Reading Public*, prolific contributor to *Scrutiny* magazine, and wife of critic F. R. Leavis.



OBJECTIVE

This study aims not only to highlight the work of Q. D. Leavis, but to reread and reinterpret her specific brand of cultural criticism, taking into account gender, religion and class subject positions. Leavis’ “habitus”—or “sense of the game” as articulated by Pierre Bourdieu—lays at the intersection of these different subject positions, inflecting her criticism in ways that are distinct from the criticism of others—especially her male colleagues and compatriots.

This rereading of Leavis’ work fits into a broader project, the objective of which is to engage with and respond to contemporary post-feminist discourses about feminist criticism, female public intellectuals, and women’s professionalism.

METHODOLOGY

Guided by concepts such as “intersectionality”—defined as intersecting social positions of which gender, class, religion and race are examples—and “habitus,” this project’s methodology consists of weaving together Leavis’ books, articles and letters with biographical and historical material. These different documents shed light on what it meant to be, as Leavis was, born female, middle-class, and Jewish at the turn of the century. The project questions how these specific subject positions inflect Leavis’ projects. How do they allow Leavis to advance a definition of culture, while making subtle, implicit commentary on gender, class and race or religion?

**RACE/
RELIGION:** What was it like to be a Jew in 20th-century England?

Consult work on Amy Levy, one of the first Jewish women to attend Cambridge

Consult work on modernist anti-Semitism by Maren Tova Linett

HABITUS

GENDER: What was it like to be a female intellectual in 20th-century England

Consult work on Simone de Beauvoir and feminism by Toril Moi

Consult work by Rita Felski

CLASS: What was it like to be middle-class in 20th-century England?

TEXT ANALYSIS

Take the following discussion of reading culture from a chapter entitled “The Puritan Conscience” in her seminal *Fiction and the Reading Public* (106-107):

“The typical self-made man of the 1750-1850 period was born into the respectable poor, attended a dame school for a short while where he picked up reading and writing, was apprenticed to a craft or trade, and either through religious conversion or, later on, political sympathies was moved to self-cultivation.”

Overtly, the excerpt discusses the way that men have interacted with literature historically, and Leavis later goes on to discuss how mass media changes the relationship that readers have with culture. The excerpt is concerned with culture, but through it Leavis advances feminist commentary. If those who are self-taught have access to what Leavis thinks is genuine English culture, then this must include women, who before the late 19th-century were either auto-didactic or educated by a governess. When reading an excerpt such as this one in tandem with historical material on women’s education, biographical material on Leavis’ education at Cambridge and commentary on female intellectuals by feminists such as Toril Moi, the feminist valences of Leavis’ work come to the fore. The same is true when one reads this excerpt from a religious or racial standpoint. Leavis was born Jewish, but makes no references to her Jewishness in any of her published work. Instead, Leavis champions the “puritan conscience” (96), and applauds the “missionary spirit” of those who partake in “taste-making” or cultural commentary (271). But this lack of overt identification with Jewishness makes sense when read against biographies of other Jewish intellectuals, such as Amy Levy, and literary criticism on Modernist anti-Semitism such as Maren Tova Linett’s *Modernism, Feminism and Jewishness* (2007). As a discipline, English literature is heavily steeped in Christianity. This results in the marginalization of those intellectuals who are not Christian, a fact which is highlighted by Leavis’ lack of overt identification with Jewishness.

FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

Leavis’ oeuvre has been hitherto undervalued and even unacknowledged when cultural historians have surveyed the interwar period, which proved to be a fertile period for the dissemination of different definitions of culture and cultural work. This project sought not only to reinvigorate discussions of cultural criticism of the 1920s and 1930s by rereading Leavis’ work from different angles; it also sought to place Leavis in the broader context of New Woman critics such as Iris Barry, C. A. Lejeune (both prolific film critics), Dorothy Sayers, and Vera Britain (both prolific writers). Moreover, it sought to elucidate what it means to be a female public intellectual in a post-feminist world that is made complicated by the additional complexities of race, class, religion, and sexual orientation.



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