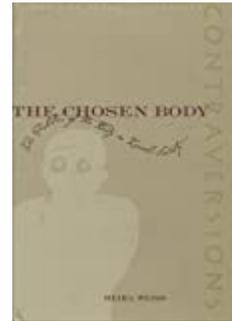


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Meira Weiss. *The Chosen Body: The Politics of the Body in Israeli Society.* Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2002. 192 pp. \$49.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8047-3272-7.



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In the past two decades the study of Zionism and the State of Israel has undergone important changes. For decades Israeli academics relied almost exclusively on diplomatic and political history, and on positivist sociological tools in their study of Israel and the Yishuv. Recent scholarship, however, has brought to the forefront of Israeli academia a host of new methodologies and theoretical constructs, such as post-structuralism, gender studies, and post-colonialism, which have dramatically broadened the critical scope of the field.

Meira Weiss's monograph *The Chosen Body* is representative of these new trends in Israeli scholarship. Armed with an expansive arsenal of sociological, anthropological, and literary theories, ranging from Emily Martin's studies of the sociology of the body to Uri Ram's and Gershon Shafir's critical sociological studies of Israeli society, Weiss's goal in this study is to examine the discursive practices that have constituted and regulated the Zionist and Israeli effort to create a new people through the prism of the body.

In this short, though dense study, Weiss sets out to show how early Zionist visions of the New Jew as the driving force behind the Zionist project created a certain ideal image of the body that continues to inform and shape modern Israeli perceptions of the body. For Weiss the pre-State Yishuv (Jewish community) as well

as modern-day Israel are highly collectivist, militaristic communities that celebrate a masculine, salubrious image of the body. She claims that this image has not only dominated representations of the body in Israeli culture, but have also played an important role in those social and scientific institutions and professions that govern and regulate the body, such as physicians, genetic counselors, and forensic scientists.

In examining the manner in which the body, as a social phenomenon, has been constructed in Israel Weiss discusses a wide and diverse range of subjects. She examines the unparalleled popularity of reproductive technologies of Israel, and the Israeli "obsession" with genetic screening tests, which as she puts it, have turned Zionist eugenics into a selective prenatal policy backed by the most advanced genetic technology. Weiss explores the role of the Israeli army, especially the screening policies of combat units, in enhancing and maintaining the masculine ideal of the Zionist body, and she looks at the way the chosen body of the soldier is remembered and commemorated in Israeli society. Weiss investigates how women have reacted to masculine image of the chosen Israeli body, and she shows how some women were able to maintain their feminine voice in a society consumed by notions of masculinity and how other women have appropriated the masculine discourse and its imagery. And

she also examines the representations of the chosen body in Israeli media in its coverage of three major stories in the mid 1990s: the Rabin assassination, the series of terrorist attacks in 1996-7, and the crash of an army helicopter in northern Israel in 1997.

In her analysis, Weiss distinguishes between two models that could explain the production of the body in modern societies. The first is what she describes as the capitalistic, modernist ethos of nation building, which disregards individuals and individualistic traits and treats society as an assembly line that produces almost identical members that are fashioned after one model of the "chosen body." The second is what she portrays as the post-national, late-capitalist ethos, which emphasizes individuality and difference and allows for the co-existence of varying and heterogeneous body types. Weiss claims that the pre-State Jewish settlement in Israel was a quintessentially, nation-building enterprise and as such it produced a single image of the chosen body which served its ideological ends. Moreover, she argues that contemporary Israel, in which nationalism and militarism is still the formative core of the country's collective identity, is still tightly connected to the same ideal of the chosen body.

While Weiss assertions are readily understandable when one examines the social and ideological makeup of the Yishuv (particularly before 1930), which was a highly homogenized society it consisted primarily of Eastern-European Jews committed to the founding tenets of Zionism claiming that modern Israel is still such a homogeneous society is somewhat problematic. Weiss is well aware of the complexity and variety of modern Israeli society, but she maintains that the nationalistic and militaristic agenda allows the Ashkenazi elite to marginalize other elements in Israeli society Eastern Jews, ultra-Orthodox Jews, Arabs – and enables the old Zionist establishment to continue and shape the country's core values.

When one examines Israeli society and culture of the past two decades, however, it is hard to ignore the great changes that occurred, changes that among other things brought about the rise of Shas, the ultra-orthodox Sephardic party, the continuing decline of the Labor party and its Zionist ethos, and even the decline in prestige and social importance of the Israeli army. True, with the on-going conflict between Jews and Arabs the army is still at the center of Israeli political life, but so-

cially it has lost some of its traditional aura. More and more teen-agers are exempt from military service and in many segments of Israeli society a lack of military record is no longer regarded as a social hindrance. In fact, in the 1990s, with the boom in the Israeli high-tech industry, the most sought after units in the Israeli army were no longer elite commando units, but rather certain sections of the intelligence branches, whose veterans founded many of the start-up companies that dominated the Israeli social and economic landscape of the previous decade. In addition, when one looks at representations of the body in Israeli literature and cinema since the 1960s, there are very rare instances in which the "chosen body," which as Weiss convincingly demonstrates was a prominent theme in the literature of the 1948-generation and in early Hebrew films, is celebrated. In fact in the works of some of the most prominent writers in Israel, A.b. Yehoshua's *The Lover*, Yehoshua Kenaz's *Infiltration*, Meir Shalev's *The Blue Mountain*, and others, the representation of the body is far from the ideal that earlier Zionists envisioned. This is particularly true of Israeli cinema, which has dealt repeatedly with the issue of militarism in Israeli society, and which since the 1960s in films such as *Siege*, *Atalia*, *Cup Final* has painted a picture of Israeli masculinity that is the anti-thesis of the healthy virility of the chosen body.

The Chosen Body provides a compelling argument for the importance of the construction of the body in the formation and development of Zionist and Israeli identity. It is especially convincing in its analysis of the way early Zionists envisioned the "chosen body" and how the Israeli military, with its unique place in Israeli society, has played an important role in the constructing the discourse of the body in Israel. But when Weiss makes the broader claim that the image of the "chosen body" in Israel has not undergone any fundamental changes over the past five decades, because Israel has continued to be driven by the same ideological principles as the pre-State Yishuv, her argument is less than persuasive.

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