

The Jew's Body: Anti-Semitism, Physical Culture and the Jew's Foot

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The assignment of difference to aspects of the body invariably shapes how individuals understand their own sporting abilities and opportunities, hence viewing the politics of gender, race, ethnicity or age through the prism of the politics of anatomy promises to be especially helpful in understanding historical justifications for the legitimization of persistent inequalities in the world of sport, exercise and physical activity. While one cannot assume that individuals remain passive to the imprint of culture, one can nevertheless fruitfully explore the history of the body as a narrative of culture in anatomical disguise, a parable of how the body is forged into a shape useable by civilization despite, not because of, itself (Laqueur, 1989).

The creation of racial stereotypes around the bodies of blacks and Jews and the search for anatomical signs of difference by dominant groups seeking modes of control over “deviant” groups has a long and painful history in Western society. Science especially has worked to rationalize and legitimize distinctions of sex, race and class to the disadvantage of the powerless. Biological and medical arguments, as Condorcet so eloquently pointed out, traditionally made nature an accomplice in the crime of political inequality. From the Enlightenment on, students of human variation singled out racial differences as crucial aspects of reality and an extensive discourse on racial inequality began to be elaborated. In particular, the analogy linking race to gender came to occupy a strategic place in scientific theorizing about human variation in the 19th and 20th centuries.

First black people, then Jews were endowed with the female characteristics of excessive sexuality as the concepts of degeneration and the survival of the fittest became embroiled with European racism. The many perceived similarities among the female body, the black body and the Jewish body which emerged from sets of interlocking and complex scientific debates were invariably designed to demonstrate their different and lower position in the social hierarchy from the white male and as contributing, therefore, to lesser or impaired abilities.

The construction of a Jewish body in the 19th and early 20th centuries was closely linked to the underlying ideology of anti-Semitism--to the view that the Jew was inherently different (and hence dangerous and pathological) (Gilman, 1991). As early as 1783, a scientist from Gottingen argued that the Jews as a race were too short to meet the criteria of modern European armies, but it was within the late 19th century, mainly European medical discourse, that particular myths and images of the Jew's body and pathological nature of Jewish gait became a repetitive theme. It was claimed that the supposed flat feet and clumsy heavy-footed gait of the male Jew rendered him, like the black, the criminal and the epileptic, unfitted to be a soldier and hence unable to function as a good citizen and a physically able worker. During the Nazi period the image of the pathological nature of the Jewish gait was consistently linked to discourse about national service and this naturally led to the notion that Jews were innately unfit to undertake physical labour and other physical and sporting pursuits. In response to persistent anti-Semitic claims about the Jew's different and faulty structure, calls for the new 'muscle-Jew' became commonplace in early Zionist literature--calls which promoted sport, physical strength, and hard physical labour as central means to shape the new Jewish body and make the new Jewish citizen. Long lasting anti-Semitic stereotypes of Jewish physical incompetence and cowardly nature made sport a risky business for Jews and perpetuated the belief that "the Jew is nimble in the head but not with his feet" (Levine, 1992).



Patricia Vertinsky makes a break point