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Book Review

Body by Weimar: Athletes, Gender, and German Modernity. By Erik N. Jensen. New York, NY: Oxford University Press. 2010. 184 pp. £32.50 (hardback).

For a long time, the history of sports has tended to limit its interest to sport's inherent structures and developments. It has failed, and often continues to fail, to analyse sport in a broader context. In the last few years, however, there have been efforts to examine the significance of sport in relation to social, cultural and political developments. Jensen ties in with these approaches, which, in the case of Weimar history, have started examining boxing, football and other competitive sports in general to explore the culture and society of Germany in the 1920s and early 1930s.

Jensen views sport as an important part of Weimar culture and uses it to illustrate broader developments and debates about gender roles and modernity. He examines mainly press articles (journals of national sports associations, sports magazines, daily press), but also includes (pop) cultural products such as films, advertising, music and penny fiction.

He argues that competitive sports offered a physical expression of a modernizing society and a means of articulating responses to changes. The body images and discourses on modern lifestyle that crystallized around competitive sports made a lasting contribution to physical culture and strongly influenced Weimar Germany. According to Jensen, this influence was even stronger than that of popular movements such as hiking and *Turnen*, which promoted the recovery of the natural body from the constraints of a rejected modernity.

Jensen begins with tennis which, regarding gender images, was the exception rather than the rule. He shows that tennis provided alternatives to hegemonic gender identities and was associated with non-monogamous, non-reproductive sex. Men's tennis was mostly seen as an amusement, not as a sport, dominated by aesthetics and lifestyle rather than by competition and discipline. The image of the male tennis player was associated with an effeminate, upper-class dandyism; the tennis club was depicted as exclusive, a space for pleasure and flirting—mostly heterosexual but also homosexual. Women's tennis, in contrast, had greater importance as a sport. It was transformed from a negligible game in the early 1920s into a demanding and internationally reputable sport, which was based on intensive training and a strong desire to win. It helped to generate an essentially modern femininity that included competitiveness, independence and muscular physicality. The tennis court was seen as a training ground for gender equality, and professional tennis opened up opportunities for women to earn their own money and pursue personal goals and pleasures.

In Chapter 2, Jensen concentrates on boxing. He shows that the male boxer embodied an essentially masculine image. Boxing was associated with a working-class background and at the same time symbolized a path to upward social mobility, financial success and fame. But Jensen also determines boxing's liberating potential for women, not so much in terms of financial success but as a reinvention of their bodies and spirits. Starting as a raunchy fringe pursuit, boxing became a fashionably daring occupation for modern women by the mid-1920s and attracted several female celebrities. It offered women independence and a way to unleash aggression and adopt male behaviour. The hyperbolic male boxer, however, also incorporated 'feminine' features, such as the exposition and eroticization of the boxer's body. Jensen also explores the overlaps of sport and entertainment and examines many examples in which male boxers or pugilistic women were depicted in films, songs, magazines and advertisements.

In Chapter 3, Jensen shows how track and field athletics was discussed in reference to broader social transformations, and promoted as a means of postwar recovery. The training was thought to create modern, disciplined and self-managed bodies, and the debate around it was shaped by

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a normatively charged division between modern sport and German *Turnen*. Tayloristic training methods were embraced for popularizing rationalization, individual success and competiveness, or demonized for producing self-absorbed, one-sided individuals. Athletics also exposed the increasing convergence between male and female abilities and bodies, which questioned the 'natural' difference between the sexes. Nevertheless, women's athletics was mainly discussed in reference to fertility and parenting skills. The female athlete became a role model of modern motherhood, a symbol for a dutiful woman prepared to give new life to the country. Her male counterpart was idealized as a disciplined man, whose fitness symbolized the German fighting power. In an equation of sport and war, athletics was judged to be a source of national rejuvenation.

Overall, Jensen's study is an enjoyable read that examines a little-known topic and convincingly unravels the complex connections between sport, gender and body images and a 'modern' lifestyle. However, some of his methodological decisions limit the scope of his assertions. Jensen's elaborate readings concentrate on debates and representations in the media, and at times one wishes for a more thorough grounding in social history and sport's historical developments in Germany. A closer connection with the organization and practice of the three kinds of sport in Germany could also have helped to contextualize the debates, to indicate how the images were adopted by individual athletes and thus bridge the gap between media representations and their reception. In his analysis, Jensen rarely differentiates between the professional sports business and the daily practice of sports in the various sport clubs, between professional competitions and sport as a leisure activity. While this allows him to grasp sport as a broader cultural phenomenon, it also blurs important distinctions. For example, Jensen's assessment of women's boxing might have profited from a clearer distinction between popular images and stagings of pugilistic women, women who boxed as a training exercise and women's boxing as a sport with competitions organized by national and international sports associations, which did not develop until the 1990s. And it sometimes seems as if the focus on sport as a vehicle for the articulation of modern gender roles sheds too much light on the liberating, emancipating aspects and too little on sport-related articulations of reactionary and traditional gender images. For example, Jensen hardly takes up allusions to the archaic fight of the boxer, which was promoted to re-establish a primordial masculinity. Even though these references to an imagined archaic past were 'modern' in a temporal sense, they cannot easily be subsumed under the normative use of the term that seems to underpin Jensen's analysis. The complicated tensions between modern and anti-modern undertones within the debate could have, at a minimum, invited further reflection on their relationship and a discussion of the term modernity itself. Also, on a purely practical level, the lack of a bibliography makes it difficult to grasp the literature Jensen draws on.

Nevertheless, Jensen offers a rich and nuanced study that places sport history at the centre of broader historical issues. He convincingly depicts the importance of sport culture not only as a catalyst for the reassessment of gender roles, but also as a context in which the body's place in Weimar society was reinvented.

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