


Book Review: Conscientious Objectors in Israel: Citizenship, Sacrifice, Trials of Fealty by Erica Weiss

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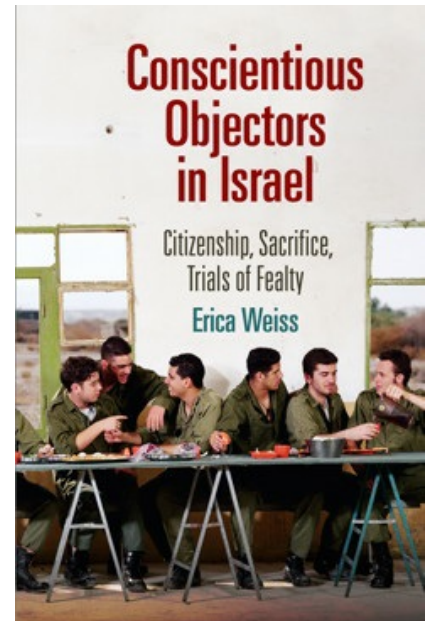
Based on long-term fieldwork, **Erica Weiss**'s ethnography chronicles the personal experiences of two generations of Jewish conscientious objectors as they grapple with the pressure of justifying their actions to the Israeli state and society—often suffering severe social and legal consequences, including imprisonment. **David Singeisen** finds that this book effectively adds to the growing corpus of literature questioning liberalism's credos, and invites the non-anthropological reader to consider fresh questions.

Conscientious Objectors in Israel: Citizenship, Sacrifice, Trials of Fealty.
Erica Weiss. University of Pennsylvania Press. April 2014.

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Reviewing this as a political historian rather than an anthropologist, I cannot comment much about the methodology. It certainly seems apt given what I know of the subject. Erica Weiss clearly constructs her narrative, provides a convincing theoretical framework through which to consider this and (in the end) one gets a strong sense of her subjects' worldview.

Rather I'd like to concentrate here on how Weiss discusses conscientious objection as a form of political expression, and what that might show us about the limitations of liberal democracy (the limitations of liberalism are a major theme in the book and *Conscientious Objectors* carries from Weiss's [previous work](#) on ethics and the limitations of state power). Here Israel is not described as a functioning liberal democracy (Weiss prefers the term 'Judaic ethnocracy'). However she offers a convincing argument that through historical inheritance and self-identification, Israeli political culture has inherited many of the idioms of European liberalism. Admittedly irrespective of this there are dangers in trying to extrapolate wider considerations from this narrative that we might apply elsewhere – some of the conditions it describes are highly culturally specific (how conscience has come to undergo secular sanctification, for instance). Yet I believe that Weiss offers us if not a wholly original than an interesting and potentially useful example of the interaction between individual liberty and mutual necessity in a strongly communal and, arguably still in many ways, liberal society.



The first chapter, "Interrupted Sacrifice", for instance examines some ways in which individual objectors testify as to their decision-making as part of group dynamics. In her introduction Weiss talks about the 'economy of sacrifice', the exchange by which one earns further social 'honour and authority' through a public demonstration of investing in society. Here, and in subsequent chapters, the objector plays both the active and passive role with regards to that. The prospective soldier is enticed into service by being cautioned as to the necessity of 'sacrifice' for the greater good. But some also accept 'sacrifice' for its potential rewards. And as Chapter Two ('Confess') demonstrates, the subsequent objector can wilfully use their sacrificial status to imbue their public testimony with moral authority, which they can use to challenge their audience's worldview.



An IDF soldier in thought, as forces prepare themselves before entering Gaza. Credit: [Israel Defence Forces](#) CC BY-NC 2.0

So as much as the objector places themselves outside of accepted cultural norms, they also participate in the wider dialectic process of negotiating a communal identity. According to Weiss her subjects object because they begin to identify the state's 'false promises' – to share a belief that while the state has promised them the opportunity to ethically 'sacrifice' themselves, in reality it is Palestinians who are sacrificed on their behalf. This subsequent conflict between the encompassing group-think of military logic and their own growing unease can culminate in a moment of moral crisis. The development and subsequent public confession of refusal can be stressful. But is this not also not 'cultural sensitivity under constant negotiation and reformulation' (Coleman and Golub's definition of 'liberal democracy' – quoted on page 115)? Indeed if that is a good working definition of liberal democracy then what Weiss chronicles here arguably seems a more direct and open process than that happening in many other Western states. Personally I was left wondering whether Israel's exceptionalism stems exclusively from its singular, ongoing security situation or from the fact that its whole citizenry is forced to directly, personally and viscerally confront that situation. Israel is hardly alone, currently or historically, among the Western nations for limiting liberal tolerance in the face of perceived threats to its citizenry (See, for instance, Eric Hobsbawm's *The Age of Capital, 1848-75*, pp. 53-4, 153-5).

The fourth chapter, "Pacifist? Prove it!", deals mainly with the process of applying for a conscience exemption from the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) and reaction to it. Much of it is fascinating. Weiss portrays a system which while formally endorsing pacific objection in practice fails to recognise 'alterity'. In a way there is a deep irony here. The application process is not well publicised and seemingly assumes the applicants should be absolute pacifists. This, along with other factors, results in many of Weiss's subjects being articulate, secular, relatively affluent Ashkenazi. They are encouraged to express their ability and in a position to do so, but one does wonder to what extent the IDF, as the state's military arm, is failing to engage with the very people the state privileges.

Military group-think, it seems, carries on through to other areas of society. Weiss points to several examples where not only the IDF but other centres of authority (the psychological profession, the media) willingly 'other' conscientious objectors, finding reasons for their protest that rob them of agency and of their ability to register political and ethical protest. At first one despairs for that 'constant negotiation' – as Weiss points out, at times the applicants and the Committee members can't even agree on their definition of violence. But there are positive signs. The emergence of a 'counter-public' of dissenting Israelis is one thing. The fact that the IDF promotes military service as a 'sensible and attractive' to modern Israeli youth meanwhile would suggest – to this untutored eye at least – that while pacifist objection may trouble the state it is unlikely to disappear. One is left though hoping for an eventual follow-up from those supporting the status quo. For completeness sake, if little else.

In conclusion then, *Conscientious Objectors* struck me as a book well worth reading. On the face of it there appears to be nothing particularly new in Weiss's comments on Liberalism (she herself admits that 'many scholars have drawn attention to the internal contradictions of liberal tolerance'). But her study forces us to ask some interesting

questions about the effective implementation of those principles in more immediately difficult conditions than we might encounter elsewhere in the West. This is not so much a book about the Israeli-Palestinian Situation, though that and its consequences are shot through *Conscientious Objectors*. Rather it effectively adds to the growing corpus of literature questioning liberalism's credos, and invites the non-anthropological reader to consider fresh questions.

David Singeisen is a third-year History PhD student at [Exeter University](#). His background is principally in international relations and military strategic theory. His research is on early 20th century British defence politics and Army Reform under the Liberal ministries of 1905-1914. [Read more reviews by David](#).

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