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This is a fascinating book, rich in ethnographic and analytical detail in which Ivry explores the cultural significance of the pregnant body and the processes of meaning making of pregnant women and their medical carers within their social context. She recounts how she developed the focus for this study through the personal experience of being a pregnant Israeli woman in Japan and subsequently back in Israel. She set out to conduct an ethnographic study of the perspectives of mothers and medical practitioners in both countries, incorporating individual interviews and observations of medical practices, antenatal classes, and seminars offered to women. Each layer of this complex weave is addressed with great sensitivity as well as theoretical insight.

Ivry’s thesis has many levels to it, but central to the book is the argument—as reflected in its title—that the pregnant body is a body pregnant with social meaning. If cultural values are, therefore, inscribed on the pregnant body (my term, borrowing from Douglas’s more structuralist perspective), this is not a fixed process, and the woman is not a passive bearer of cultural values but a co-producer, with her medical advisors, engaged in the process of meaning making. Ivry appropriately refers to previous work in discussing the very different ways in which both Japanese and Israeli women act in a pragmatic rather than simply passive fashion, negotiating and responding to the social and medical demands and expectations vested in their pregnant state.

The richness of the layers of analysis makes me hesitate to try to sum them up, but Ivry herself sums up the archetypal views of pregnancy in Israel and Japan respectively as *geneticism* and *environmentalism*. The pervasive Israeli sense of genetic threat and fatalism is discussed in relation to aspects of Jewish history and concerns; Ivry references a sense of existential threat and in the final chapter also draws in the normalization of militarism in the current Israeli democracy. Both countries share a history of eugenic thinking, but the Japanese view of pregnancy is a more relational and ecological one, with far less attention given to the role of genetics or indeed of genetic screening and diagnosis and abortion in producing health babies and citizens. Ivry
relates this not only to the Japanese rejection and sense of shame about eugenics in their society in the recent past, but also to a more longstanding philosophical orientation. This theory has also been discussed by other writers on Japanese women.

Arising from these contrasting concepts of pregnancy are very different bodily regimes. In both cases, women experience social pressures, but for Israeli women, the imperative is to make (appropriate) genetic choices through maximizing use of screening, while Japanese women are attributed an active mothering role from conception, in which they work hard through nutrition and other body management and surveillance practices to build and nurture a healthy baby. Ivry notes that Japanese women are certainly attributed a more active role, and one they embrace positively on the whole. Nonetheless, their role relies on social norms of gendered division of labor and domesticity that have increased markedly with 20th century: the shift to a more urbanized population and away from agriculturally based economy.

Thus, women’s widely shared duty to reproduce a healthy nation, or to reproduce its well-being and security, are played out in different ways in each cultural and national setting. Ivry’s ethnography illuminates how, although women’s cooperation is needed in these micro-physical regimes, which do not operate through simple coercive power, the “ob-gyns” (who typify the iconic Israeli pregnant woman as hysterical and demanding of ever more biomedical screening technology) actively intervene to engender and maintain these powerful fears and anxieties. Her account of the “pregnant women’s days” couples frequently attend and of the deployment of ultrasound imagery with considerable rhetorical force to provoke fears of genetic problems was particularly striking, but she also discussed the preoccupation with screening in relation to a sense of existential threat that predates its introduction. Ivry’s ethnography throws light on the quite different uses to which the technology of ultrasound is put in each country and the differing meanings it conveys. In both cases, this new technology was embraced, perhaps, because of its resonance with existing cultural dispositions.

Ivry shows how the pro-natalism of both states is materialized in very different ways. While Japanese women are attributed more active agency, this also translates into duty to eat healthily, to self-monitor the body, and to actively nurture: The pregnant woman in Japan is already viewed and described as a mother and the fetus as the baby. In contrast, Israeli women experience pressure to view their pregnancy as tentative and in limbo; the physical work or embodied state of pregnancy is scarcely acknowledged; and women avoid attributing personhood to the fetus.

The discussion moves back and forth between wider theoretical and historical scope and the views and day-to-day practices of the people involved, remaining engaged with individuals’ experiences and the micro-practices of pregnancy while situating these within their macro-social context. Ivry refers to Foucault’s concept of “regimes of truth” and his discussion of power as productive
(as well as Jordan’s discussion of authoritative knowledge) in considering how “micro-physical regimes” (238) of pregnancy are continually being coproduced. This fine-grained and complex analysis takes the sociological debates about women’s relationships with birth technologies in a technocratic society a step further.

I was initially concerned about the relative absence of midwives, who provide much of the everyday care in pregnancy and birth for women in Israel and in Japan. I first thought that the ethnographer herself, because of her own dispositions, had difficulty in seeing the midwives and had unselfconsciously assumed that it would not be enlightening to interview them or observe them directly. On further reflection, however, I attributed this instead to the rather shadowy role and status of midwives within both national settings, where pregnancy has become highly medicalized, albeit in different ways. Also left unexamined was the impact of the maternity care system in each country on women’s embodied experiences and understandings of pregnancy.

Ivry makes relatively limited reference to U.S. influence on both countries in the decades following World War II and the ways in which its macro-level role in both national cases may have played out in the modernization of maternity care. The theme of comparison with Western bodies and societies from a century before is, however, picked up in the final chapter, and Ivry explores with great subtlety the complexity of the interactions between existing dispositions and notions of the self and responses to Western influence.

These points illustrate the degree to which I found reading this text engaging and thought provoking. The analysis works on a number of levels and really brings new dimensions to thinking about key themes in social theory, such as embodiment, cultural continuity and change, gender and medicalization. I have already added it to the reading lists for my postgraduate students and I recommend that it be widely read by health practitioners and policy makers as well as anthropologists and sociologists.