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BOOK REVIEWS

Michal Palgi and Shulamit Reinharz (Eds.)

One Hundred Years of Kibbutz Life: A Century of Crises and Reinvention

New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2011. 330 pages.

The subtitle tells it all. The kibbutz has undergone an extraordinary century of crises and reinventions. Such rapid change would have killed off most organizations, especially those as value-driven and ambitious as the kibbutz. Not only has the kibbutz managed to survive but it has overcome difficulties, most resulting from changes in its environment, in often creative ways. In other words, the kibbutz is adaptive and even resilient. Whether its adaptations have strengthened or weakened its core identity is the question underlying this hardheaded, unsentimental book edited by Palgi and Reinharz.

Many of the authors of the twenty chapters are present or former kibbutz members; Palgi is herself a member of Kibbutz Nir David and Reinharz is a longtime student of the kibbutz. The book is organized into three sections. **Part I. The Unfolding History of the Contemporary Kibbutz** looks at early fault lines in the kibbutz that deepened with the economic earthquake of the 1980's. **Part II. Representations of Kibbutz Change** contains an unusual collection of chapters on the way the kibbutz was depicted in literature, film and the built environment. **Part III: Reinventing the Kibbutz** examines the place of the kibbutz movement in Israeli society, its international connections and, most importantly, the evolution of new kinds of kibbutzim.

First, some basic facts. The year 2009 marked the hundredth year of kibbutz life, which places its beginnings well before the creation of the state in 1948. The longevity of the kibbutz is itself an extraordinary fact. As the number of kibbutzim increased, their impact grew beyond anything seen in other societies with communal forms. This impact was, most obviously, in shaping Jewish society according to its collective beliefs before Israel existed and in defending Jewish settlement in Palestine before and after 1948. The kibbutz has contributed to Israel

and to other countries the development of agriculture and industry, democratic governance, self-management in production, village design, progressive education and innovation every step of the way.

In 2009, there were 267 kibbutzim and currently about 270 scattered across the country with memberships ranging from 30 to 1500. Today, the 120,000 members of kibbutzim constitute a little over 2 percent of the total Jewish population. As they have throughout their history, kibbutzim perform beyond their numbers: 40 percent to Israel's agricultural production, 7 percent to overall industrial output and 9 percent to industrial export, and 10 percent to tourism. Kibbutz members continue to hold visible positions in government, industry and the military. They have accomplished these achievements despite –perhaps because of constant challenges to their collective values and way of life. The boundary between the kibbutz of today and the larger Israeli society is more permeable than in the past. Most crucially, the kibbutzim of Israel have had to conform to the requirements and legal mandates of a right-wing government that has been notably unsympathetic to left-wing, collectivist practices.

While the kibbutz was already changing in the direction of privatization, especially in consumption, the fiscal crisis of the 1980's and the Israeli government's measures to curb inflation and stabilize the economy speeded up this process. No longer protected by its allies in the Labor Party, the kibbutzim were required by the Likud government to agree to tough terms for repayment of its debts to the state and banks, totaling 7 billion NIS. This was a terrible shock for the kibbutzim that threatened the survival of several.

Avraham Pavin, in his chapter "Crisis, Social Capital and Community Resilience" analyzes the arguments and paths taken in the crisis. Most paths led to privatization which, once introduced, led to more privatization.. Some kibbutzim began to reward members differentially in their jobs and encouraged members to work outside the kibbutz to bring in more funds to the collective. Hired labor became acceptable. Rather than collective consumption in which laundry, education, food and housing were allocated equally, the kibbutz gradually shifted resources for consumption to personal accounts.

In a few kibbutzim, ownership of houses was transferred to members and some considered dividing kibbutz property among its members. Several kibbutzim went into partnership with non-kibbutz investors in kibbutz enterprises and some rented kibbutz apartments to nonmembers and built "community expansion" neighborhoods for residents to live alongside the kibbutz. Some of these changes, especially the new neighborhoods, bring vitality to aging kibbutzim. Needless to say, these arrangements did not particularly reinforce the old kibbutz values. By now, only about one-third of kibbutzim adhere to the traditional kibbutz collective model (Gan, p. 33).

More were in process already and many gave rise to other changes. Governance by the weekly general assembly gave way to elected representatives, with occasional general assembly meetings. The issue of collective child-rearing took up the attention of most kibbutzim for years, resulting in “bringing the children home” and dismantling the children’s houses. It was usually the mothers who pressured the kibbutz to do this and if it didn’t happen fast enough, parents simply took the kids out of the children’s house. Like several other major changes, the decline of collective child-rearing was unplanned within each kibbutz and across the kibbutz movement. This kind of change resulting from the preferences of the members was costly, since the kibbutzim had to substantially expand apartments designed for a couple and a few visitors to make room for several children.

At the establishment of the state of Israel when the kibbutz lost its centrality, leaders did not adapt quickly enough to the new reality. The rigidity of the kibbutz leadership at the time engendered resistance among members, especially the younger generation, and this resistance sapped collective energy. Alon Gan describes the ensuing changes in the 1960’s as shifting the kibbutz subtly from being a meaningful way of life to the kibbutz as a home, from ideological discussion and collective life to psychological language and a search for self-realization. And most importantly, from “we” to “me.”

Thus the groundwork was laid for a possible collapse of the kibbutz in the 1980’s. It took a growing group of younger technocratic leaders to cope with the challenges of that period. But it also took some of the strengths of kibbutz culture to pull them through, something that the editors might have emphasized more. The kibbutz is a “talk culture” in which members grapple with the most important issues facing them, as demonstrated in the remarkable collective writing of the early, pre-state days and at least through the 1960’s in Shula Keshet’s fascinating chapter on kibbutz literature. Eliezer Ben-Rafael and Menachem Topel refer to substantial social capital even in the privatized environment of the new kibbutz,

This resource was generated by close cooperation between members’ informal ties and deepened their commitment to the collective welfare. Social capital expressed itself in member responsiveness to urgent tasks even after regular work hours and to a readiness to adjust to changing circumstances and new constraints. It was also expressed in voluntary involvement in committees in charge of various social and cultural spheres. (p. 253)

The editors of *One Hundred Years of Kibbutz Life* take a positive view of the changes in the kibbutz. They are against the hand-wringing that has often accompanied most change in the kibbutz. They argue that as the surrounding society has changed, the kibbutz has adapted. The kibbutzim, despite their original desire to be separated from Israeli society as it developed with the establishment of the state, are part of that society—now more than ever.

But can't there be too much adaptation, so much that the kibbutz exists in name only? To this question the editors say on the very first page of their book:

Is the situation "good" or "not good?" Or both? After examining the most recent social science research and humanistic explorations...we have concluded that the answer is "the kibbutz has survived and is likely to survive because it is capable of changing dramatically." We call the changed kibbutz "reconstituted" (p. v).

Some of the authors of the chapters in this book are not sure reconstituted kibbutzim are still kibbutzim, although they may remain a valuable "brand." For the kibbutzim have become quite attractive to former members and other Israelis looking for a good life for themselves and their children. Compared to the current life in Israel society, the kibbutz looks like a decent, humane way to live.

In a careful effort to define the kibbutz, Ben-Rafael and Topel talk about two types of contemporary kibbutzim: the renewing kibbutz ("kibbutz mitkhadesh") and the collective kibbutz ("kibbutz shitufi"). The latter has stuck to most longstanding practices. The former has adopted at least one of the following: (1) differential wages, (2) distribution of shares in kibbutz enterprises, (3) privatized apartments.

What do the two types have in common? They both subscribe to the principle of **unconditional extended social security**. ("arevut hadatit"). This principle works out differently in the two types of kibbutzim. In the kibbutz *shitufi*, unconditional extended social security lies at its core and it arranges its resources, which tend to be greater than in the kibbutz *mitkhadesh*, to make sure it can provide this security. In the kibbutz *mitkhadesh*, the response to people's needs is controlled by the availability of resources. While the privatization of some of the kibbutzim *mitkhadshim* has gone very far, these communities wish to be called kibbutzim—even when they privatize the means of production and thus make economic decisions in terms of profitability only. Ben-Rafael and Topel are critical of these values.

In this climate, humanistic considerations that, in the past, could lead a kibbutz to retain a branch only because it provided handicapped people jobs that gave them feelings of contributing to the collective welfare need not be continued. Technocrats who are now solidly in command stress the practical outcomes, in purely economic terms, of any decision-making, and they are weakly challenged by people sensitive to other arguments. (p. 253)

So what is a kibbutz? A mixture of models and identities on the *shitufi* vs. *mitkhadesh* types. With all the changes that have taken place in the kibbutz in the past two decades, one thing that makes life in them more than mere residency is *arevut hadatit*, the sense that one is part of a collective whose members "determine the arrangements of the community where they live and continue to be sovereign over their social order" (p. 258).

The adaptability of the kibbutz has recently been challenged by young people, many of whom grew up in kibbutzim, who are creating new communal forms. With the fervor of their pioneering forbears, they are experimenting with kibbutzim in poor and neglected sectors of Israeli society. Close personal relationships and study groups in the context of basic equality prepare members to spread communal ideals to people in development towns, urban neighborhoods and rural areas. Another experiment views the kibbutz as a site for the protection of the environment. Kibbutz Lotan in the Southern Arava has dedicated itself to sustainability from Jewish and Zionist perspectives.

The history of the kibbutz suggests that some of these youthful ideas will mature into yet another kind of kibbutz. Others may be waiting in the wings.

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The Return of Private Property: Rural Life after Agrarian Reform in the Republic of Azerbaijan

Halle Studies in the Anthropology of Eurasia, Vol. 24, Max Planck Institute of Social Anthropology, Berlin: Lit Verlag and New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2010. 236 pages.

Rural Azerbaijan is a relatively neglected topic in English-language literature and Yalçın-Heckmann's book is a welcome addition to a very short list of studies on rural Azerbaijan.¹ The author's approach is rooted in economic anthropology and relies on original field work carried out in 2000-2002 in two sites: the village of Tazakend in Shamkir District (western Azerbaijan) and the village of Pir in Ismaili District (north-central Azerbaijan). The field work produced a series of case studies and two small surveys, which form the empirical core of the book.

The first two chapters trace the history of western Azerbaijan as it evolved from a Czarist "colony" to a Soviet Socialist republic and finally to a transition economy with the rural sector driven by land reform. The discussion of land reform is based on a string of case studies and interviews with officials. This gives a thrilling sense

1 Two additional studies of rural Azerbaijan were published too late to be included in the list of references: *Rural Transition in Azerbaijan* (Z. Lerman and D. Sedik, Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2010) and *Family and Family Life in Modern Azerbaijani Village* (N. M. Guliyeva, Baku: Elm, 2011, www.anl.az/el_en/gn_bseavam_en.pdf).

of immediacy to the story, but we miss a systematic description of the land reform process with its technical intricacies.²

The historical overview is followed by four empirical chapters. Three of these chapters focus on materials collected in Tazakend – a village in western Azerbaijan that, like the rest of the country, went through radical economic changes associated with land reform, but was allowed to develop without major demographic upheavals. The fourth chapter is uniquely devoted to Pir – a village of internally displaced persons who were forced to leave their original homes in the Lachin District near the border with Armenia due to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

The survey conducted in Tazakend usefully distinguishes between farming activities on the traditional household plots (the *mahla*) and the land share received from the former collective farm during the process of land distribution. One of the interesting findings is that all families in Tazakend cultivate their household plot, but 40% of respondents do not cultivate their privatized land share. The case studies attempt to explore the reasons for the surprisingly limited use of privatized land shares in Tazakend (which does not appear to be characteristic of the country as a whole), but fail to produce clear answers. Still, it seems that land is not left idle and privatized plots not cultivated by the owners are often entrusted to relatives or other farmers.

Despite its smallness (just 0.14 hectares on average), the household plot is not simply a subsistence farm: families use their small household plots to produce crops that are sold commercially, sometimes even in export markets (herbs, greenhouse tomatoes, etc.). Commercial sales are observed to have a strong positive effect on family wellbeing, while the readiness to engage in commercial sales increases with the increase of land holdings. Thus, households that cultivate both their household plot and the privatized land share achieve higher levels of wellbeing and higher levels of commercial activity than households that cultivate only their household plots. Given this effect of the size of cultivated land on family wellbeing, the limited use of the available privatized land in Tazakend is a puzzling phenomenon that requires further study.

The qualitative case studies explore two broad sets of issues:

- collective strategies for managing household and property;
- the moral economy of the village: norms and practices of exchange and solidarity.

Probably the most fascinating part of the chapter on collective strategies is a discussion of the role of female household heads as petty traders, producers, and even money lenders. The case studies demonstrate the ingenuity and toughness of rural women. They also reinforce the quantitative survey results by highlighting the

2 See, e.g., Lerman and Sedik, loc. cit., Chapter 3.

central importance of land for rural family incomes: land can be used to produce cash crops for sale, while the unused portion can be rented out to other farmers to generate additional cash revenue. The chapter on the moral economy of the village explores primarily the dominance of kinship solidarity and family ideology. The geographical dispersion of migrant workers from Tazakend to far-away regions in Russia focuses the attention on the need to interact with the core family and on the significant contribution of migrant earnings to household expenses and resources.

The survey and case studies provide a very interesting glimpse into rural life and peasant farm economics in an Azerbaijani village. They furthermore tell a story of Pir – a village of internally displaced persons exposed to the hardships of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Although relatively little space is devoted to Pir, readers may find it instructive to compare the livelihood strategies in the stable environment of Tazakend with those of the internally displaced residents of Pir. If the author were to publish the two survey databases for Tazakend and Pir in full on a publicly accessible web site, other researchers would be able to analyze additional issues that are not covered in this volume.

Who will read the book? Obviously all those interested in rural Azerbaijan and rural societies in transition. Anthropologists, social geographers, and even development economists will find much interesting in the case studies assembled in this volume. The book is warmly recommended for the wealth of empirical material that it brings together in the two surveys – Tazakend and Pir – and in the collection of case studies.

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