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# JOURNAL OF RURAL COOPERATION



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# The Ideological Crisis of the Kibbutz Movement

*by*  
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## Abstract

The kibbutz crisis is seen against the background of the confrontation of a solidary and cooperative system and a laissez faire environment. The alleged freedom enjoyed by people in a free market society is questioned. The current contest imposes a race where only the strongest and fittest can survive. True individualism asks for equality of chances. Toward the next millennium new forms of communality are needed to counteract the threat of fundamentalism. Despite the present crisis, the kibbutz may serve as a practical answer and provide the archetype of a small autonomous community in a capitalistic environment.

When continuation in the usual way or by the usual means becomes impossible we speak about a crisis. The crisis is a turning point either to improvement or to decline. It is no exaggeration to define the present situation of the kibbutz – as a movement and in the single communities – as critical. Some of the main issues of kibbutz-life became or are becoming irrelevant under the given circumstances and basic values which constitute the kibbutz are not observed or only partially.

Being a comprehensive system, embracing all realms of life it is impossible to single out one reason that causes the crisis. The tremendous changes of this fin de siècle in the economy, culture and arts, in mass communication and political life, in Israel especially, challenge the kibbutz as a whole.

Due to the interconnection of the above issues, it seems arbitrary to deal with each one of them separately. In the framework of this essay, issues of ideology will be examined.

The question is whether a social-economic entity based on egalitarian principles, cooperating closely with the free market system, is capable of challenging the capitalistic scale of values, as an alternative. It is a confrontation of solidarity and cooperation with laissez faire and contest. The industrialization of the kibbutz caused a close cooperation of the kibbutz with the free market. In the first phases the kibbutz maintained an equilibrium between its values and norms and the market system. But when a part of the kibbutz-members adopted the principles of laissez faire and tried to introduce them into the kibbutz, the crisis became obvious. Application of these

values in the kibbutz is a *contradictio in adiecto* (an inherent contraction) and arises severe doubts since under these circumstances kibbutz life may become senseless.

The ethos of *laissez faire* frees the society from any kind of responsibility as to the individual. The context where everyone competes with all, leaves the single person to his/her own; success or failure is the private matter of the individual. Contest is the basic value. Thanks to competition, progress is made, it drives people to do more and better. The second important feature of the free market system is consumption. The system is one of goods and the purpose of goods is to be sold. To sell more you have to encourage increased consumption, therefore it has to become a cult: "Tell me the quality and quantity of your consumption and I will tell you who you are." To come into being, conspicuous consumption as a status symbol, a source of prestige, is more than a way of life, its life itself. Capitalism maintains a certain kind of individualism pretending that this is the real, the only one. The capitalistic ideology claims that men have the choice between an egalitarian society and personal freedom. Individualism and egalitarianism contradict each other. According to the prophets of the free market system this is the only one enabling people to enjoy freedom. These short and superficial comments are far from being an exhaustive characterization of the liberal ideology that dominates the Western world. They are only outlines of the scale of values and norms of the system.

Unlike the classical German philosophy, social philosophy is evaluated according to praxis and historical data. The social philosophy is not a purpose in itself, its goal is to create a theory to establish a just society. Therefore some questions should be answered: does liberalism as it is presented today serve true freedom and welfare of all individuals or of the vast majority? Does competition in the free market society function as a tool to assure progress to all? What is the essence of individualism? These are some of the crucial questions and criteria to examine the free market society from the theoretical and practical point of view.

The fundamental of a social conception is the critical approach to the reality and the applicability of alternatives. Under the present circumstances of the severe kibbutz crisis, the question of its future cannot be answered unequivocally. The problem is that in view of the failures and shortcomings it became unclear whether collective life is practicable and should be the dream, the utopia of men. The breakdown of socialism, the ideological bankruptcy of social democracy, the predominance of the so called free market system in the industrialized world, the process of urbanization of the kibbutz, all these shake the self-confidence of its members. Seemingly Fukuyama's theory (1992) of the end of history, namely that the liberal capitalistic system will last for good, is the ultimate truth.

A fundamental scrutiny of the reality proves the above theory to be absolutely mistaken. As a matter of fact, the *laissez faire* economy does not exist. Mega-concerns and cartels dominate the global economy, and free enterprise and initiative

are nothing but an illusion for the vast majority of people in the Western world and not existent at all in the developing countries. The recent conflict between Japan and the U.S. revealed the truth. The steps taken by the rivals have nothing in common with Milton Friedman's theory. The global village is the playground of rivalry between the big powers of the world economy. The common citizen does not play any role in this worldwide wrestling. Attitudes are shaped by the information supplied by a small number of communication-giants. Men are free in the Western society. According to the law, it is a matter of fact. But their style of life, their cultural environment, the choice of occupation, even the bulk of consumption are dictated from outside and are not the result of free choice. The paradise of freedom is an illusion as to the individual. Anthony Giddens (1989) says: "...One of the major characteristics of the modern state... is a vast expansion of the capability of state administration to influence even the most intimate features of daily activity."

John Kenneth Galbraith (1992) deals with the division of Western society in two parts. The contented enjoy all the achievements of high technology and an abundance of consumer goods. On the other hand the underprivileged are doomed to do unqualified work or at the worse are jobless. Actually they are deprived of all what progress offers to men, their position is so inferior that they are unable to fight for the improvement of their life.

It is quite evident that these are only critical remarks, far away from a profound analysis. But despite the limitations of this short essay, we should not ignore the issue of individualism. Its meaning is self-realization embracing all the features of personality. Under all circumstances limits are set to personal freedom. But in the system of free competition it becomes a race when only the few, the chosen, can reach the goal, while the gap between the individuals exists from the start, from the early beginning of life. Real individualism demands equality of chances. This equality can be guaranteed by appropriate education for all. Therefore, only a profound improvement of the way of life of the underprivileged strata can create a situation where individualism ceases to be the privilege of the upper class. Individualism, *i.e.* freedom of the individual, can be realized in a society which strives for maximalization of social equality. Individualism without social justice is nothing but social Darwinism.

Presenting capitalistic liberalism, as practiced today, as the ideal and the only viable system is extremely misleading. Even the hardest critique of egalitarian and collective life can't justify the idealization of actual liberalism. Since for the time being the mentioned system is the one which proves vitality, criticism without outlines of an alternative will not do.

For the time being the desperate tend to fundamentalism. They are a concrete threat of violence and totalitarian regimes. People in despair lose their capability to think rationally. The danger of fundamentalism is on the threshold of the Western

world. Therefore the "Culture of Contentment" might be fatal and cause a chaos nearly unimaginable. A positive alternative is vital for the free world.

Not only the political problems force us to reshape our social concept. Let us only review some of the crucial issues to come to a conclusion. Not contest but cooperation, teamwork and understanding on an international scale are demanded. Science and its progress and further achievements are based on teamwork. The isolated scientist in his lab or behind the desk belongs to the past. Cooperation of teams of scientists is the way of research today and even more tomorrow. Environmental problems are on the agenda of mankind and are not anymore a problem of tomorrow. Any delay of an active approach to the quality of the environment might cause irreversible damage. Only a shared burden of economic restraint and big investments to improve the quality of environment can solve the problem. This goal can be achieved provided economic profit is not the only and ultimate purpose of free society.

An ideological-theoretical reorientation in the Western world is requested and the self-confidence in the collective egalitarian movement might be regained. Social philosophy has to recover from the setback of the breakdown of socialism in its diverse versions. But it is obvious that new theories have to be created considering the advantages of both the market economy and social solidarity. These have to be adapted to the 21st century and the diversity of social structures.

The global village is only half the truth. Diversity at the national level and the division of the globe in industrialized and developing countries ask for different ways of maintaining societies, based on solidarity and cooperation. That is a challenge to be met open mindedly.

The conclusion is that despite shortcomings and failures, the egalitarian idea will be an unseparable part of social philosophy in the coming century. The question to be answered is how does it concern the kibbutz. First of all, the basic ideology of this social formation cannot be seen as obsolete, belonging to the past. In praxis, we witness a very interesting process, namely the renaissance of small communities. The mega-society is an alienated one. Small communities establish the interpersonal links that got lost in our century. The empowerment of small communities is the attempt to challenge the "Lonely Crowd". These communities will be and where they already exist are based on solidarity and communalism. Notwithstanding the current crisis, the kibbutz may serve, thanks to ongoing changes, as a practical answer and provide a model of a small autonomous community in a capitalistic environment.

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