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The Transformation of the Kibbutz: From a Classless to a Class Society

by

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Abstract

The kibbutz, communal and collective settlement in Israel, is known as a classless society. Research carried out in kibbutz settlements since 1951 discovered several different levels of stratification in the kibbutz society. However all researchers agreed that even though differential access to kibbutz resources was found in the kibbutz society, no development of a class society had emerged. The argument of this paper is that since processes of change occurred in the kibbutz society (*i.e.* industrialization, the introduction of hired labor, the economic crisis, and the change of the social world), a development of a class society is emerging in the kibbutz. In this connection an analysis is presented of the social borders of the kibbutz, its labor market and the effect on the kibbutz members of the changes in their *social world*. The conclusion of this analysis supports the argument that a class society is developing in the kibbutz.

Introduction

Is a class society developing in the kibbutz? This has created an ongoing discussion at least since 1951. Eva Rosenfeld (1983) argued that there existed a special type of social stratification in the kibbutz that had not created a class society. Pavin (1996) presented a thorough review of the research completed on this subject. He concluded that all scholars who dealt with the issue of class society in the kibbutz examined the differential access to resources in the kibbutz society to different members or groups of members in the kibbutz. The conclusion of this research review was that social stratification could be found within the kibbutz but there did not exist social classes. In other words, the kibbutz kept its nature as a "classless" society (Talmon Garber, 1970; Kressel, 1976; Ben-Rafael, 1986; Pavin, 1996).¹ Theoretically these findings were corroborated in studies dealing with the

¹The references presented here represent the main findings and arguments on the subject of social stratification in the kibbutz.

issue of social stratification in the Socialist states (cf. Wesolowski and Kolaniewicz, 1979).²

In this paper I argue that the changes which have been occurring during the last ten years have the potential of developing a class society in the kibbutz. My argument stresses the need to define the social boundaries of the kibbutz community; and in the framework of this definition to examine whether the formation of a class society is in progress. By social boundaries of the kibbutz I mean the demarcation line between those who are a part of the kibbutz community *i.e.* the kibbutz members and their families, and "others". In the kibbutz discourse as well as in the literature, these social boundaries imply a congruence between the members' collective and the kibbutz community. This assumption should be examined because in the everyday kibbutz life, non-members as well as members play a role and interact in the kibbutz community experience.

Basic Assumptions of the Kibbutz Ideology

One of the basic assumptions of kibbutz ideology is that the kibbutz is a classless society, *i.e.* that the kibbutz members share their property and that there is no connection in the kibbutz between a member's contribution and his access to the resources of the kibbutz for his needs. Practices were created to preserve this basic assumption. They included the following rules:

- the kibbutz capital and property belong to the community;³
- there is no connection between the budget of the kibbutz member or family and his position or his earnings;
- positions in kibbutz government are rotated. The rule of rotation was formulated to prevent the development of a power elite that could gain benefits from their positions;
- no hired labor should be used in the kibbutz (Rosner and Getz, 1996; Lanir, 1990; Rosolio, 1997).

In spite of these safeguards, differential access to resources in the kibbutz was found and the creation of a power elite was postulated (Shapira, 1987). The findings did not reveal the emergence of a class society; Rosner (1985) referred to the danger in the introduction of hired labor into cooperatives and kibbutzim, arguing that it will bring to the degeneration of the kibbutz.

²Although we may be skeptical today about theoretical formulations of Eastern European theorists from the years of the Communist era, it seems to me that their theory on the subject of stratification in socialist states is relevant to the kibbutz.

³Legally, the property of the kibbutz belongs to the mutual association of the kibbutz.

Classes and Strata: A Theoretical Approach

In this paper I am following Weber in the use of the term “class”. Weber defined “class” in the context of people’s economic status and their prospects in life as a result of their wealth and control of economic resources. He added to his definition the connection between the classes and the labor structure, and the positions held by people in the labor market as related to their location in the class system (Gerth and Mills, 1958:181). Marx, in his class theory, emphasized that in the class society class-awareness and class-consciousness develop to define the class interest (Marx, 1983). Wright (1997:382) defined this class-consciousness as “particular aspects of the subjectivity of individuals”. Therefore I argue that in the context of the social boundaries of the kibbutz a class society is developing.

I use the term “social strata” in the meaning of structural inequality in a given society according to income, education, housing, origin, gender, etc. (Marshal, 1994). In fact, the terms “class” and “strata” overlap as the result of the different discourses that define them. I refer to the term “strata” in a less circumscribed fashion. In other words, I distinguish between the unequal access to kibbutz resources within the members’ collective of the kibbutz (which was defined as the stratification in the kibbutz, a stratification in which class-consciousness did not develop), and the emergence of classes within the kibbutz community, accompanied by the development of class-consciousness in the different social groups that constitute the kibbutz.

To understand the class structure of a society it is relevant to analyze the structure of its labor market. It is postulated that the structure of the labor market follows the social stratification and class structure in a given society (Ryan, 1981; Stier and Lewin-Epstein, 1988) *i.e.* that people’s job opportunities are defined by their location in the social structure: class structure and labor market are linked.

The Social Boundaries of the Kibbutz

The kibbutz community includes not only the collective of its members but also a variety of non-member groups. The question is whether these groups play a role in the creation of a class society in the kibbutz? Is it the result of the interaction among all social segments within its social boundaries?

Sheper (1980) argued that the social boundaries in which the kibbutz members act extend beyond the physical boundaries of the kibbutz community. Kibbutz members are constantly interacting with different environments. Many are the parents of children living outside the kibbutz. Others work outside the kibbutz (currently about 30 percent of the kibbutz members). There are numerous other examples of outside influence as well. This situation affects the discourse of kibbutz members because they concurrently interact with different environments; thus they function in a multi-cultural situation. The same rationale holds true inside the social boundaries

of the kibbutz, containing as it does, different segments of population in addition to the collective of the kibbutz members. Each segment has its own sub-culture and discourse. As all these segments interact, a social structure is formed. It is a firm belief that this structure has the potential for the emergence of a class society.

Kibbutz society is composed of the following segments that interact on an internal basis: 1) the kibbutz members; 2) hired workers who work in the kibbutz but mostly live in neighboring towns; 3) temporary residents, volunteers, etc; 4) young people who grew up in the kibbutz, have finished their army service but are not yet members; 5) residents who rent apartments in the kibbutz.⁴

Kibbutz members: the average size of a kibbutz is about 370 inhabitants of which ca 210 are kibbutz members.⁵ In the course of the last 10 years a downward trend can be discerned in the number of the member population in the kibbutz. In addition there is a continuing trend towards imbalance in the age structure of the kibbutz members, *i.e.* they are getting older and the average age climbs (Demographic summary, UKM, 1996). The effect of this development is that the kibbutz must hire more and more employees to meet its economic and social needs.

Hired employees: the percentage of hired labor rose between 1990–1995 from 31 percent to 52 percent of all kibbutz industry workers (Halperin, 1998). In social services and agriculture the trend is the same.⁶

Temporary residents: the size of this group is unstable and floating and in my view has no influence on the creation of a class society in the kibbutz. Nevertheless their impact is two-fold: they balance the demographic structure to some extent and on the other hand they create a measure of instability in the kibbutz population.

Residents who rent apartments in the kibbutz: this segment is not yet significant in the kibbutz, but may become so in kibbutzim which are in a demographic crisis, or kibbutzim located in urban areas, where renting out apartments can be profitable. In the framework of the recovery plans of these kibbutzim that are in an economic crisis, the kibbutzim were given the opportunity to use part of their land for commercial purposes in order to increase their income and regain economic viability. The idea of building neighborhoods for non-members in the kibbutzim grew out of this. The

⁴At the present time there is intensive activity to build neighborhoods for non-members in some of the kibbutz settlements.

⁵The data are taken from the United Kibbutz Movement (UKM), but it can be assumed that they are representative of all kibbutzim.

⁶There are no accurate data on the number of hired workers in kibbutzim, but there is enough indication to enable us to assert that the data on hired labor in kibbutz industry represent the general situation.

assumption is that such neighborhoods can solve two problems: both the economic difficulties and the demographic imbalance by bringing into the kibbutz young or relatively young people to counterbalance the aging kibbutz member population. This development is still in its early stages.

In summary, the kibbutz is more than the collective of its members. These interact in their everyday life with several social groups of participants which play roles within the boundaries of the kibbutz. Every group described has its social boundaries and there is very little cross-over mobility from group to group. The differences between the groups and their status can be understood through their location in the labor market in the kibbutz.

The Kibbutz Labor Market

In my study of the labor structure of Kibbutz Ein Gal (pseudonym), I analyzed the types of work performed by kibbutz members and by hired workers and found the following results.

Kibbutz members manned only 48 percent of the work positions in the kibbutz which were concentrated in education, industry and services. Only a third of the members were working in agriculture. My analysis found that in our example (the industry in Kibbutz Ein Gal) primarily kibbutz members manned the managerial positions while the hired employees were mainly blue-collar workers (Rosolio, 1997). The labor market theory proposes that when people of lower social status begin to enter a certain profession, sector or department, the status of all workers in that profession, sector or department, is diminished. Consequently the higher status groups leave these sectors and professions (Semyonov and Lewin-Epstein, 1989). At the same time the reward in these positions also declines. This process explains why there is a change in working positions manned by kibbutz members when hired labor is introduced to the kibbutz. Kibbutz members even prefer working outside their kibbutz rather than staying in the "low status" blue-collar positions in industry and agriculture (Halperin, 1998).

Class Consciousness and Changes in the Kibbutz Discourse and "Social World"

As was discussed previously, the social class structure exists within the framework of the social boundaries of a given society, *e.g.* within the social boundaries of the kibbutz community. The structure of the labor market described above, created status groups, in the Weberian meaning, according to the position of the employees in the enterprises. There is congruence between the position in the kibbutz labor market and the sector to which the worker belongs. The hired employees and temporary workers, who are non-members, are the blue-collar jobs in the enterprises and services, while the kibbutz members hold most of the managerial and high-level service positions. There is hardly any mobility between the status

groups in the different strata of the labor market, except for the movement of kibbutz members from the blue-collar jobs to higher levels.

These processes described create in fact a class structure. Wright (1997) defines class structure as follows:

Class structures differ not only in the distribution of people across the various locations in that structure, but also in the extent to which people's lives are bounded by specific class location. At the micro-level, class is explanatory because it shapes the interests, strategies, capacities and experiences of people, and each of these effects depends not simply on the static location of the individuals in a job-class structure but also on the complex ways in which their lives are linked to various classes through careers, mobility, social associations and social ties (p. 149).

In the author's view this is an apt description of the situation in the kibbutz. There are almost no social ties or friendships among the different segments of the kibbutz population. The only ties that can be expected are those among kibbutz members and residents of the neighborhoods now being planned and carried out in some kibbutzim. As we do not have any significant experience with that potential population, it is assumed that it will be a higher middle class population and will be a reference group for kibbutz members. Among other things, we can expect that among these residents will be kibbutz-born families who like living in the community but not as kibbutz members,

Wright (1997) argued that at the micro-level we could refer to the subjectivity of individuals. I will add to this the connection between the process of class formation and the "social world" as Strauss (1993) defined it and the changes of the discourse in a given society. According to Strauss the "social world" of a community or a group consists of a set of shared goals, resources and ideologies. The discourse is the language used by a given society to expresses its "Weltanschaung", reality perception and the meaning and interpretation of reality (Foucault, 1996). In other words, the meanings and language and symbols express the class-consciousness. The discourse developing in the kibbutz society is in fact the discourse of the non-kibbutz capitalistic society. This discourse takes for granted the existence of a class structure in the society. Table 1 presents the changes in the kibbutz discourse: The changes in the new language compared to the traditional one suggest that the new discourse has adopted the capitalistic "social world". This can be interpreted as a result of the situation in which the members of the kibbutz find themselves in a class structure within the kibbutz social boundaries.

Change and Transformation in Kibbutz Members' Opinions

The Institute of the Kibbutz Research at Haifa University is conducting an ongoing public opinion survey of the kibbutz population since 1989. In this case

Table 1. Changes in the kibbutz discourse

Traditional kibbutz discourse	New discourse
Collective budget	Privatization
Committee	Board
Coordinator	Manager
Cultural committee	Leisure committee
Farm	Business
Kibbutz	Community
Reward	Profit
Work	Making a living
Work expenses	Salaries
Workers coordinator	Manager of human resource
General assembly	Council

the trends in kibbutz members' attitudes can be traced and analyzed. It is possible to determine whether the change in kibbutz members' attitudes represents changes in the meaning given to the kibbutz reality (Berger and Luckman, 1967), *i.e.* a change within the system, or a transformation of it (Fletcher, 1990) in the context of a class society which adjusts to the capitalistic environment. Table 2 presents response patterns from this survey. It appears that there is a shift from a "social world" appropriate to a traditional kibbutz classless society to a "social world" of a class society like that of the larger society in which the kibbutz and its members function.

Table 2. "In favor" response of members of kibbutzim of the UKM to a public opinion poll on kibbutz issues in 1989–90 and 1996 (percentage)

Questions	1989 (%)	1996 (%)
• Money reward for more work hours	45	56
• Material rewards to kibbutz officers	25	51
• Hired labor for jobs that kibbutz members are unwilling to do	44	60
• Differential salary to kibbutz members according to member's contribution	34	45
• Differential salary to kibbutz members according to member's managerial position	(question not asked)	34

N=573

Adapted from Palgi and Sharir, 1997:32-35.

The findings demonstrate a constant trend toward attitudes that reflect the transition to a discourse which is significant of a stratified society. As I argued before, the stratification in the kibbutz community changed to a class society, because the kibbutz members form a distinct class within the kibbutz community, a class that controls and owns the kibbutz assets and resources.

Once class-consciousness developed in the minds of the kibbutz members, their

demand to privatize the kibbutz assets by allocating them to the members surfaced. In a meeting of the United Kibbutz Movement Center, which is composed mainly of secretaries of kibbutzim, the participants were asked to respond to a questionnaire asking about their reaction to the idea that the kibbutz assets will be allocated to the kibbutz members. Table 3 presents their responses.

Table 3. Response of UKM center members to statements concerning asset allocation of the kibbutz to its members – 1995

Attitudes	No. of answers	Percent
• All the assets belong to the community	26	20.8
• A separation between private assets (houses, etc.) and public assets (means of production, land, etc.)	58	46.4
• Allocation of shares of productive assets to members	14	11.2
• All assets, including rights to the land, are privatized and should be owned by kibbutz members	27	21.6
• Total	125	100.0

Source: Rosolio, 1997:261.

The data show that about one third of the respondents, who are kibbutz activists or kibbutz elite, are in favor of privatizing the kibbutz assets. Although the respondents are not a random sample, they reflect the trend quite accurately. If we add those who are in favor of privatizing the apartments it results in about 80 percent. Thus we see the transformation of the kibbutz members' "social world" as it has developed along with the development of their class-consciousness.

The Emergence of a Managerial Class within the Members' Collective

One of the results of the process described may be the emergence of classes within the kibbutz members' collective. Shapira (1987) argued that there is an emergence of a power elite in kibbutz enterprises. Leviatan (1994) found that the main agents of change toward privatization are the managers of the economic enterprises in the kibbutz. The managers who interact constantly with the managerial strata outside the kibbutz perceived them as their reference group, and adapted their discourse and their "social world" accordingly. Shenhav (1995) pointed out that in the development of bureaucratic organizations a managerial class emerges which develops its interests, discourse and culture. This process is discernible in the kibbutzim as a result of the development of a class society and it explains the findings of Leviatan.

Conclusion

The processes of change in the kibbutz, the introduction of hired labor in significant numbers in the kibbutzim and the adoption of organizational structures were results of the economic crisis in which the kibbutzim found themselves. These processes affected the kibbutz social boundaries, which have developed different parameters. It was possible to refer to the social boundaries of the kibbutz as the boundaries of the members' collective as long as the traditional kibbutz discourse and "social world" were dominant. Although differential access to the community's resources existed within the members' collective, the safeguards of the kibbutz rules prevented the creation of social classes.

The massive introduction of hired labor created in the kibbutz a labor market in which the jobs and working position were allocated along social lines and origins. Thus a class situation was created. The social boundaries of the kibbutz were no longer congruent with the members' collective, because other status groups were included in the kibbutz experience. Within the kibbutz several status groups interact, primarily the members and the hired employees, the latter mostly in blue-collar and low service jobs. One of the differences between the members and the hired employees is the fact that the members have control over kibbutz assets whereas the hired employees do not. In other words, a class situation in the Weberian meaning is present.

This process brought in its wake the change of the discourse and "social world" of the kibbutz members. The kibbutz members, and first and foremost those in managerial positions, adopted the symbols, culture and discourse of the capitalist environment. It influenced the decision-making processes led to privatization arrangements in everyday life, and resulted in the relinquishing of the safeguards which had served to prevent a stratification process in the classless society in the kibbutz. In the course of this process the rank and file kibbutz members developed a class-consciousness and a manager class emerged within the kibbutz collective. This new class is the main agent of change and transformation in the kibbutz. Although the processes described in this paper are an on-going phenomenon in the kibbutzim, it is possible to reverse this process by adopting appropriate methods of participation and collaboration between the social status groups within the kibbutz.

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