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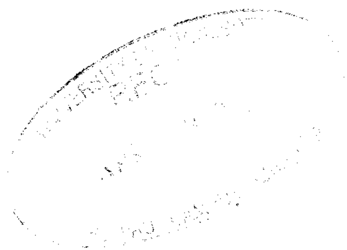
JOURNAL OF RURAL COOPERATION



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International Research Centre on Rural Cooperative Communities
המרכז הבינלאומי לחקר קהילות כפריות שיתופיות

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Basic Dilemmas of Utopia in Comparative Perspective

by
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Abstract

This paper is intended to consider, in the light of the recent transformation of the Israeli kibbutz, the variety of social experiments which similarly illustrate the Proudhonian-Comtian-Durkheimian emphases on cooperation and collective solidarity, within societies dominated by market economy, the philosophy of progress and, nowadays especially, processes of globalization. These forms draw their interest from the fact that they put this vision to empirical test which shows the tensions, difficulties, and potentialities involved. We will especially focus on the kibbutz, the Mondragón complex of cooperatives and the American communes which show, beyond the differences of context and the singularity of each specific type, how far collectivism may concur with individualism, and solidarity and egalitarianism with social differentiation and conflict. On the other hand, the comparative analysis also reveals, in varying respects and at diverse degrees, similar concerns, dilemmas and tensions. As a rule, the tension between the enterprise and the community principles has gradually witnessed a predominance of the former over the latter and this "embourgeoisement" leads to confrontations between values and aspirations as well as between callings and interests. The collective's survival, it appears, is endangered both when it is threatened by insolvency – *ipso facto* – and when it is successful – as it risks then to be torn apart by divergent interests which impend on its moral purposes. Above all, this comparative analysis breaks the naivety of those who fully participate to this era of globalization and still perceive utopia beyond technocracy.

The kibbutz is undergoing drastic changes. By its very survival, it continues to provide a living test of the Proudhonian-Comtian-Durkheimian tradition (Proudhon, 1902; 1962; Durkheim, 1973) which advocates the development of forms of cooperation and collective solidarity within a society dominated by market economy and the philosophy of progress, and today cannot but also be described as "global". Beginning with Marx (1975), as soon as the mid-19th century, this kind of vision has attracted the criticism of those who aspired to strife for a society liberated from the civilization of capitalism and not just from the social ills of its political economy. The kibbutz, when it was created in the first years of the 20th century, has been

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likewise attacked by radicals as a small-scale experiment conducted in a specific society, without any general message (see in Darin-Drabkin, 1970). It was also, and mainly, argued that it is a "collectively privatized" structure. The kibbutz, in this outlook, represents a form of collective capitalism which turns the kibbutzniks into members of the capitalistic class, and submits them, like any capitalist, to the rules of the market and the competition for wealth. Would the kibbutzim succeed to flourish, they will inevitably be cut off from the "proletariat" and join the "exploitative class".

Those who adopted this line of thought argued for a socialism cut off from particular historical and cultural roots, and which would abolish any form of private ownership. These conditions alone may show the way to a new civilization grounded in the cooperation and solidarity of all human beings. Only such a socialism, they argued, which embraces society as a whole, would be able to offer an alternative of universal significance to capitalism. These critics praised the Soviet regime after the Bolshevik revolution, and their followers admired later the Eastern European and Chinese versions of socialism. They saw in these regimes the concretization of the abolishment of private ownership of means of production and thus of the very division of society into social classes. In brief, a first phase of the realization of "true communism".

Kibbutzniks could have replied, as forecast by Bakunin (1950) decades before the Bolshevik regime, that any socialist revolution installed from, through and by the State inevitably degenerates into a new exploitative class system. This system may even be worse than capitalism because of its anchorage in the state apparatus, which predisposes it to totalitarianism. Kibbutzniks could then, in the Proudhonian-Comtian-Durkheimian perspective, assess that their experiment shows that cooperation among individuals does not exclude the pursuit of progress, and that non-private forms of entrepreneurship can make do without bureaucratization.

This is not to gainsay that the basic criticism of Marx against Proudhon and of the radical detractors of the kibbutz has effectively come true. Kibbutzniks make up today collectives which, in spite of all the difficulties and crises that they undergo, control land, factories, schools and settlements. By any criterion, these collectives can hardly be viewed as "proletariat", and definitely belong to the middle-class. Kibbutzniks, from this point of view, have simply shown that communities which are also enterprises and self-perceived social elites may at the same time stand out as singular collectives vis-à-vis the rest of society, and be integrated into its class system, among the privileged.

The kibbutzniks of the 1990s might, however, reply that with all its shortcomings, hardships and "embourgeoisment", their experiment has at least the merit to have outlived the Soviet regime and its various duplications in Eastern Europe. Kibbutzniks could recall here, with sad irony, the leftist leaders of the Gdud Ha'avoda, a fore-runner of the kibbutz movement, who in the late 1920s left Palestine

and returned to Russia with the conviction that there was no future for kibbutzim and that only a regime like the Soviet Union will forward the advent of the "better society".

For decades, kibbutzniks, however, could hardly lead this kind of discussion with their detractors, as most of them were themselves infatuated with the same ideological sources. Ironically enough, these people who created the major kibbutz federations and came to illustrate the anarchist model were, by conviction, leftist socialists who saw in the kibbutzim the local model of vanguard of the proletariat.

Understandably, for many years, kibbutzniks failed to elaborate ideologically on the meanings of their paradoxical "praxis". At best, an answer which they opposed to detractors was that the kibbutzim were microcosms of the future society. As "microcosms", it was contended, kibbutzim did not represent a final stage but only a temporary step toward the transformation of the whole society into "one kibbutz". In parallel, the world polarization of the social-democrat-communist antagonism in the context of the Cold War as well as the local conflict which developed between the majority of the kibbutz movement and the national leadership, strengthened those kibbutz organizations in their ideological convictions – the quite negative attitude of international communist organizations toward the validity of the kibbutz as a form of socialism, notwithstanding. The kibbutzniks did liberate themselves gradually, ever since the 1970s, from the influence of the Soviet Union and the Marxist-Leninist doctrine. They could now elaborate on their experience, were they still interested in ideological matters at all. In fact, the kibbutzniks of the late 1980s are not only very different from their forunners in earlier stages – they are now much more oriented to practical and material issues.

Yet, from a sociological point of view, the kibbutz draws a large part of its interest from the fact that it still puts the Proudhonian-Comtian-Durkheimian vision in a realistic perspective and shows the tensions, difficulties, setbacks and potentialities involved. This is especially true in this era of globalization, when capitalism is triumphant everywhere, and primarily, in the very previous centers of diffusion of non-capitalistic worldviews. In this context, moreover, the kibbutz experience actually concurs with what we also learn from other types of collectives which, in the present-day globalized world, share with the kibbutz, at varying respects and in diverse degrees, similar concerns, dilemmas and challenges.

We may first think of the *kolkhoze* (Sakwa, 1989). Unlike the kibbutz movement, this collectivization has been imposed by the state (Rywkin, 1990), and has remained tightly controlled by it for decades. The rigor of state-control – through the regional machinery stations – discouraged even the poorest peasants who, in the late 1920s had been the principal benificiaries of the collectivization. It is only much later (in the 1950s and 1960s) that, in response to the low agricultural productivity, *kolkhozes* were given more autonomy. Private houses, garden plots and a few farm animals as

personal property were now also authorized and, soon enough, became the principal basis of a family's welfare. It is not before the 1991 reform (Epshtein, 1993), that thorough privatization was allowed. The reform, interestingly enough, was to have a limited impact. The vast majority of the farmers (Csaki and Lerman, 1993) remained in the *kolkhoze*, re-shaping it into an agricultural, marketing and financial cooperative aimed at supporting the private households' activities. That individualization has concurred with the retention of a collective-entrepreneurial principle reminds the contemporary kibbutz. In a similar vein and in spite of the obvious contrast which exists between them, one even finds resemblance between the kibbutz endeavor and contemporary rural developments in China, the last bastion, today, of state-socialism. Ever since the early 1980s, in the context of a general shift of the regime to market economy, a new agragrian system has been built on the ruins of the so-called Peoples Communes. The new system encourages individuals, families or groups, to engage in contractual relations which the local authority. Initially a work-for-income exchange, the system came to allow land leasing (see Lin, 1993), and evolved into what is called a township model (Zhang, 1987). This consists of associations of villages and towns controlling self-employed households and groups, by contract. This structure is also involved in the development of industrial corporations (Zhang, 1992).

What may seem relevant in this system for the reflexion about the kibbutz is the possibility that residents of the village or the town might be divided into different categories – individual workers in organizations directly owned and operated by the local authority, members of cooperatives bound by contract to the local authority, or private family farms. In other words, the township collective leaves wide room to individual and group occupational and organizational choices within a framework which emphasizes a basic solidarity among all constituents, in a perspective which also gives predominance to the business-like management of resources. Under this angle, the kibbutz dilemma between partnership and entrepreneurship as well as the problem of the relations between community and enterprise seem to find here an echo.

The contemporary development of the township, when compared with the *kolkhoze* and the kibbutz indicates the variety of possible relations of collective enterprises to their members' work-investment. In the townships, we have said, a variety of forms of individual or collective entrepreneurship develop in contract relations with the collective authority which retains control over the basic means of production – land and capital. In the *kolkhoze*, a direct exploitation of a part of the basic means of production by the collective is retained but its role is reduced to support the economy of households. In the kibbutz, as we have seen, the general trends seem to lead to a situation where the collective enterprise is retained, but tends to represent only a part of the collective income, as members are now free to choose employment whether in the common enterprise or outside the kibbutz, on

an individual basis.

In sum, the kibbutz appears to conserve the importance of the collective enterprise with more vigor than the *kolkhoze* or the township. On the other hand, in all three forms we witness a pluralization of the forms of relation of the collective enterprise to the individual work-investment. Moreover, in all three cases, the collective enterprise continues to play a major economic role, within the context of a capitalistic market economy that is more and more embedded in what is now agreed to call "global economy". This is the very essence of the anarchist model. Ironically enough, both in the Soviet Union and in China, collectives close to the anarchist utopia have been engendered by Marxist-Leninist regimes, and it is they which have shown the greatest capability to outlive the political economy of state-socialism. This seems to parallel, in the opposite direction, the fact that kibbutzim which best illustrate that anarchist utopia, have, as for them, mostly defined themselves, for decades, as the vanguard of a Marxist-Leninist regime to come.

At variance with the *kolkhoze* and the township, however, the kibbutz also evinces, we have seen, an elitism which draws on the conviction of kibbutzniks to represent values of general significance for society as a whole. This dimension is not relevant for the *kolkhoze* or township which structure rural populations belonging to the weaker segments of society. In this respect, the kibbutz, which allies the community principle not only with the enterprise principle but also with elitism, is more exhaustively compared with relevant collectives in Western societies.

One case in point is Mondragón. This complex of cooperatives, in the Spanish Basque country, started in the 1950s with the creation by Owenites, of a factory for heaters and cookers (Bradley and Gelb, 1983). This enterprise was soon imitated by others in the area to form a wide network of enterprises and organizations. With the help of a savings bank, the Caja (founded in 1959), by 1980 there were 80 cooperatives employing from 18,000 to 45,000 members (through Mondragón's ramifications). They produce a whole range of goods, from machine tools to furniture; several cooperatives are agricultural. The complex includes special funds for welfare, from child allowances to pensions, provides health care and runs elementary and secondary schools (Bradley and Gelb, 1983).

The individual cooperatives are bound by Mondragón's general regulations not to exceed 500 employees, the size considered appropriate for cooperative management. For each enterprise, a General Assembly of members elects a Board of Managers and a Social Council. The range of wage variation is about 1 to 5; the lower ranks earn slightly more than in non-cooperative enterprises, and the higher ranks receive about half the comparable wage. Acquiring an ownership-share is required from any new member in the individual cooperative – the value of about one-year's pay at the lower level. A cooperative's eventual success increases the value of the ownership-share (Whyte, 1988), which may discourage newcomers and incite the members to enlarge

the factory, employ more hired workers, go public and sell out shares at a high price. Mondragón tries to resist such pressures by a variety of restrictive regulations.

Mondragón demonstrates the capability of groups to act as collective capitalist entrepreneurs, and to create a sector regulated by solidaristic norms at the same time (Kasmir, 1996). It also shows the difficulty involved by this kind of enterprise: the challenge to retain it within the frame of norms, when cooperation and profitability diverge. In both respects, Mondragón duplicates the kibbutz. What is more, the Mondragón complex has developed organizational concepts aiming at a simultaneous optimization of entrepreneurship ambitions and the retention of solidaristic partnership; it then faces, however, increased pressures of instrumental perspectives and interests which might lead to dislocation or "normalization". Mondragón, like the kibbutz, addresses here a most central issue of modernization and modernity, namely: How is it possible to retain a sense of values which are of general significance where economic development is a dominant stake? More than any structural characteristic, it is this challenge, as in the case of the kibbutz, which identifies and singularizes Mondragón vis-à-vis "regular" capitalistic enterprises.

Mondragón, however, differs from the kibbutz by its more restricted ambitions. A set of cooperatives, community and enterprise do not overlap in the model which it offers. The allegiance of this model to any form of sharing egalitarianism is a priori limited to the specific regulations of the various cooperative networks in which individuals may be members. Hence, the major challenge represented by the amplification of Mondragón's entrepreneurship mainly concerns the retention of solidaristic partnership in the enterprise – not the community dimension, at least directly. It is in this respect that the Mondragón experience takes on its general societal significance, and it is in this repect that "normalization" would contradict its elitistic calling.

The commune offers more resemblance with the kibbutz, though it would be misleading to thoroughly assimilate them. Communes share in common with the kibbutz similar references to community, enterprise and elitistic principles. However, due to the different contexts of their inception, the contents which make up the kibbutz identity principles are far from identical to the communes'. Above all, the kibbutz elitism drastically differs from the parallel code of the communes, both religious and secular. The kibbutz movement has, indeed, been characterized from its very beginning by its anchorage in the center of society. Ever since the first kibbutzim, it constituted a political and militant force articulating ideological messages drawing on the dominant culture, and fighting for its very centrality in society. It is against this background that the kibbutz federations could sustain youth movements and recruit new members, and thus expand to include, in the early 1990s, 270 communities, a small percentage of the general population, but an important segment of the rural sector, and a determinant factor of the latter's composition.

This, in turn, relates to the kibbutz economic import on society, both by the scope of its control of national resources – land, water and equipment – and output – crops, industrial production and export.

On the other hand, communes exist in many places and cultures, but in most cases they are marginal and considered an esoteric endeavor. It is always engaged in a search for general meanings but the radical character of this search and the sacrifice it requires make it unattractive to the many. Communes tend to isolate themselves from the environment to safeguard their life-styles and spiritual endeavor (Oved, 1986). This applies both to the Oneida religious communes, for instance, which aspired to moral perfection, and the Owenite or Fourierist communes which were moved by the ambition of reforming society. Communes, moreover, are acerb in their criticism of society; they are mostly led by authoritarian principles, and dominated by a charismatic figure – even when administrative or economic functions are separated from the spiritual leadership. They make a point of emphasizing the symbols that identify them, and while the family is mostly a central institution of the community, the collective is perceived as an extended family, entrusted as such with responsibility for the education of the young.

The wide majority of communes do not survive more than 10 years. This frequent failure of communes is accounted for mainly by internal conflicts (Shpayer-Makov, 1987), economic difficulties, unequal motivation of participants or disillusionment with the ideal of the commune. Kanter (1968; 1972) contends that to survive a commune must be united by a strong cohesion and dedication of members. Hall (1978;1987) points out that this commitment is a function of a variety of social factors like ethnicity, leadership or cultural homogeneity. Interestingly enough, the successful commune, according to Hall, consists of the meeting point of this worldliness, *i.e.*, pragmatism and material ambitions with an ideology of communion, *i.e.*, sharing egalitarianism. The experience of the kibbutz sustains this contention but it also shows how far and complex are the tensions embedded in this junction.

The experience of the American Amana colonies (Royle, 1992) is another illustration of management of such tensions. Each of the six or seven Amana villages created during the 19th century in an area of Iowa – the spiritual offspring of the old German religious Community of True Inspiration – had its own land, church and services. They lived off farming, food processing, textile and woodworking. The critical test came when the third generation took over the leadership, at an epoch when the colonies had become attractive to tourists. The Great Depression, however, then shook the communities' self-confidence, leading to a decision to make do with communal life and re-organize the economy. The Amana Church Society took over the religious affairs, and a new Amana Society was established to govern economic matters, with all former commune members becoming stockholders. This Society is still operating more than 60 years later; it is still widely owned by Amana people

and continues to run branches which go from farming to electrical appliances and tourism.

Cooper (1987), who studied the social history of 19th century British communes, assesses that the entrepreneurial nature of communes necessarily develop extensive economic relations with their environment, in spite of their ideological hostility to this environment and their fear to be contaminated. As a rule, however, economic success strengthens the commune's external relations, which in turn gradually affects its members' commitments to the utopian idea. On the basis of their analyses of communes like the Shakers' and Oneida, Barkin and Bennett (1972) assert, in a manner that is not less close to our own convictions, that utopian collectives prosper or fail as a part of the capitalist economy. In their attempts to build more humanly satisfying societies, communes often turn capitalist themselves, employing hired labor and getting more and more involved in the world around them.

While many a commune has been destroyed by internal discord, the tension between the enterprise and the community principles has gradually witnessed a predominance of the former over the latter, wherever the communes showed a capacity to survive. This "embourgeoisement" process, as we have called it with respect to the kibbutz, is reported by researchers of communes as the cause of new confrontations. These oppose values and privatistic aspirations, exigencies of partnership and entrepreneurship, the conviction of conveying general, social objectives and considerations which insist on the collective's own goals. Communes, and this applies here to kibbutzim as well, constitute a type of collectives for which survival is difficult both when it is threatened by insolvency – *ipso facto* – and when it is successful – as it risks then to be torn apart by divergent interests which impend on its moral purposes.

In fact, the whole range of collectives overviewed in the above, including the commune, share, at varying degrees, the dilemmas and challenges that transpire in the contemporary transformation of the kibbutz, in a context where the direct environment and the local ethos and traditions play an ever lesser role and where, in contrast, the local society is always more and more interconnected at varying respects and degrees with the rest of the world. It is because of this general character of the kibbutz experience that its study contributes to the contemporary renewed discussion of utopia.

One might say that the kibbutz tends to both confirm and reject the expectations of analysts tempted by kibbutz-like models of social endeavors and who, whether knowingly or unknowingly, draw on the old anarchist perspective. The kibbutz reveals the naivety of those who in a social reality characterized by multi-sided interconnectedness and the growth of multi-national corporations and organizations, perceive utopia beyond technocracy, as the fulfilment of equality and as the antithesis of contemporary plagues – from waste economy to alienation. We have learned

that decentralized democratic enterprises – as advocated by Frankel (1987) – is not an exception to the universality of power processes (Foucault, 1970; 1972; 1984). The kibbutz teaches us that even here technocrats are able to achieve privileges and a liberty of action which the rank-and-file are hardly able to control. The overwhelming tendency of kibbutzim to retreat from a comprehensive and all-encompassing social responsibility vis-à-vis members, to clearly-defined obligations between the collective and the individual, similarily casts doubt on the realism of Gorz' (1980; 1985) hope to ground cooperatives on comprehensive social exchange. In a same vein, the instrumental nature of many kibbutzniks' motivation to stay on in their kibbutz do not support Bahro's (1986) belief in the viability of ascetic communes. One might also contend, on the other hand, that the kibbutz confirms that Toffler's (1971; 1983) vision of industrial cooperativism, or Masuda's (1990) notion of multi-centered open community are "workable". The difficulties of the contemporary kibbutz relate primarily to its economic functioning, but at the same time it is its status as a collective entrepreneur that accounts for much of its vitality and its capability to overcome its hardships.

Yet, seeing the hardships that the contemporary kibbutz undergoes and the amplitude of its transformation, how can we be sure about the future of this utopia? This question cannot, of course, be answered from a deterministic perspective, to the same extent that the creation itself of the kibbutz could not have been forecast before Deganya, the first kibbutz (1911). The present changes have not, so far, completely disrupted the continuity between present and past but this alone does not warrant the future – and we know the sense of failure and self-disappointment prevailing among kibbutz members ever since the mid-1980s crisis. We also know that the problems they face in this era of globalization are incommensurate to all they have experienced before.

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