The Industrialization of the Kibbutz: Utopia and Practice

Henry Near

Haifa University (Israel)

Abstract

The kibbutz is an outstanding example of a post-utopian society: an experiment based on a utopian concept, which has developed in ways which its founders, who were spurred on by a quite clearly defined concept of an ideal society, would not have approved of, and in some cases simply not conceived of.

Kibbutz theory never related to science as such. But its practical applications - technology and industry - have been components of kibbutz theory and practice from a very early stage. The “agrarian bias” - the belief that agriculture and rural life formed a main component of any ideal society - was part of every variety of kibbutz ideology, from the beginnings of the kibbutz in the first decade of the twentieth century. But during the twenties one of the main kibbutz movements developed a theory according to which the ideal kibbutz would comprise “agriculture, industry and handicrafts”. This led to struggle between various groups of kibbutzim, centered on the question of what was the ideal way of kibbutz living, which eventually split into different movements.

From the mid-forties, however, industry spread to all the kibbutz movements, and from the fifties onwards it began to be recognized as an essential component of the kibbutz economy. Today there is virtually no kibbutz without its factory, and many have several; and many kibbutz members' work in sophisticated industrial concerns, some within the kibbutz, and others outside it.

This lecture will outline the historical development of this process, and the ideological, educational and economic struggles and dilemmas which accompanied - and still accompany - it. It will ask whether the present state of the kibbutz is compatible with the utopian ideal; and, in particular, what is the present and future state of the agrarian bias.
The kibbutz is often thought of as one of the most persistent examples of a utopian society, one whose members attempt to put into practice an ideal, or pattern of a community on which they are agreed, and which is seen as a guide to their day-to-day activities. As I have argued elsewhere, however, it is more appropriate to call the kibbutz a post-utopian society: its founders (and those who joined it in later generations) evolved a utopian vision, in reaction to the reality of the society in which they lived (the Jewish Diaspora in Europe), and attempted to realize this vision in the very different situation of pre-State Jewish Palestine. But, after the first utopian moment - the thrill of the earliest period in their new life, when they felt that they had achieved their ideal - they found that they had not managed to build a society exactly corresponding to their pristine vision: conditions were too hard, many changed their opinions in the early stages of kibbutz living, unforeseen tensions were felt; and, above all, they were "only human beings" who were not always able - or willing - to live up to the ideal of cooperative and egalitarian living which they had set themselves. A situation of cognitive dissonance set in, which was resolved in various ways: many gave up their utopian vision and left the kibbutz; others adopted a strategy of denial, and maintained (despite much evidence to the contrary) that the real did in fact correspond to the ideal, or, in another version, had done so in the early days of the kibbutz; and others, again, remained in the kibbutz and evolved a new utopian ideal, to be realized in an indefinite future. Thus, there existed within the kibbutz movement, and often within the same kibbutz, concepts of past, present and future utopia.

The industrialization of the kibbutz is in many ways a typical case of post-utopian thinking. The founders of the first kibbutzim were born into Russian Jewish communities whose members had been forbidden to own land for centuries, and lived in the oppressive environment of the Jewish ghetto or shtetl (small, primarily Jewish, town or village). Influenced by the winds of romantic thought which reached the Jews of Russia in the second half of the nineteenth century, they adopted the agrarian ethos common in other nineteenth-century nationalist movements in Europe (and, for that matter, in the US): the belief that, in Jefferson's words, the farmer is 'the most precious part of a state'. In order to build a healthy Jewish society in Palestine, therefore, it was necessary to create an agricultural working class; and, just as they saw their small cooperative groups as a model for social organization of the whole of future Zionist society, they considered themselves a model for its economic set-up: a purely agricultural society would restore the Jews, long cut off from the wholesome influence of the day-to-day contact with nature, to normality and ensure the survival of the Jewish community in Palestine.

This vision was never realized. The Jewish community of Palestine developed along lines which rarely matched the utopian ideals of the kibbutz. But for a decade or more the kibbutzim grew slowly in size and in number, and maintained their agrarian purity. And, despite the fact that many became disillusioned and left the kibbutz altogether, the leaders of the emerging kibbutz movement maintained stubbornly either that they had,
in fact, achieved the utopian ideal, or that their original concept remained unchanged and would eventually be realized by dint of hard work and adaptation of the individual to the requirements of the ideal society. To the agrarian ethos and the principles of communitarian socialism they added another, that of “self-labour”. Kibbutz society was conceived of as a small, economically self-sufficient community whose members were “neither exploiters nor exploited”: as an economically independent community, it would be outside the capitalist nexus, and would neither need workers from outside to maintain it nor have to send its members to find employment in outside society. So important did this principle seem to them that the first kibbutz, Degania, returned two-thirds of the land it had originally been granted by the Zionist movement on the grounds that their community, which they intended to limit to about forty members, would not be able to work so big an area without hiring workers from outside the kibbutz.

In the early twenties, however, another of the possible variations of cognitive dissonance appeared: not an abandonment of the utopian mindset, but a significant variation of the pristine ideal. Historically, this change was associated with the name Shlomo Lavi, a leader of the kibbutz movement who had been living in various kibbutz communities for the past five years or more. In a series of articles and lectures, Lavi declared himself faithful to the central ideas of the kibbutz: equality, cooperation, and the building of a communal society. But, he said, the practical application of these ideals had led to unnecessary suffering and privation. The desire to build a close-knit, family-type community had led to lack of privacy and unbearable tensions between the members. As a result of this concept of the ideal society, individual kibbutzim had been deliberately kept small, which had restricted their economic development and unnecessarily reduced their standard of living. The ideal of the kibbutz should be to grow, both in numbers, in the variety of its members and in their professional occupations. Unlike the earlier kibbutzim, he proposed an economic model based on a combination of agriculture, handicrafts and industry.

This ideological stance was adopted by the Kibbutz Me’uhad, the biggest of the three kibbutz movements which were established in the late twenties and early thirties. But, although the aspiration to develop industry as an essential element of the kibbutz economy became an article of faith in this movement, for some twenty years it was itself no more than a utopian aspiration; for kibbutz industry only began to develop to any significant degree under the special conditions of the Second World War, when the economy of the Jewish community in Palestine became geared to supplying the Allied forces in the Middle East with industrial products of all sorts, in addition to basic foodstuffs. Although one of the kibbutz movements remained faithful to its original agrarian ethos for several decades, over the years the economic realities began to undermine its ideological purity: many kibbutzim, founded in locations important for security reasons, did not have sufficient land to enable them to derive even a minimal livelihood from agriculture. The idea of kibbutz industry became acceptable throughout the kibbutz movement.
This trend was intensified from the 1960s onwards, when it became clear that although, with the land and water available, it was possible to satisfy the needs of the local population and engage in export crops, agriculture alone would not enable the kibbutzim to maintain the steady rise in standards of living which they needed in order to keep up with the rest of the country, and prevent a constant population drain. Kibbutz industry grew exponentially. In 1940 only 815 kibbutz members, of a total of 6,079 working in productive branches, worked in industry; by 1972 this number had grown to 10,591 out of 33,335. Since then, in parallel with the Israeli economy as a whole (and in many respects in its forefront) kibbutz industry has continued to grow, both absolutely and in proportion to the overall kibbutz economy; until in 2004 the 266 kibbutzim then existing owned 303 factories, in addition to 77 “regional” enterprises jointly owned and managed by kibbutzim; in all, kibbutz industrial enterprises employed some 34,300 people.²

The development of kibbutz industry, which - once the prohibition on industry as such was abandoned - was largely the result of market forces, cast a huge shadow over the agrarian ethos. This change of emphasis was often given ideological backing in view of the commitment of the kibbutzim to serve the best interests of Israeli society: it was seen as one way in which the kibbutzim could alleviate one of the major problems of Israeli society, by providing employment for members of the general population - particularly new immigrants, and particularly in peripheral areas.

However, this development also meant the end of the principle of self-labour. The market demanded constantly expanding production, and the necessary manpower was not available within the kibbutzim. And as Israel industry in general developed, so did kibbutz industry; indeed, by the 1970s it was considered to be one of the most efficient and adaptable sectors of the Israeli economy as a whole. In some cases, it was similar to the relatively primitive factories of the 1940s, in that it was based on mass labour, managed by a team of expert kibbutz members; in others, it became more technologically sophisticated, requiring a high degree of expertise which was not necessarily to be found within the boundaries of the kibbutz. In both cases, the pristine ideal of self-labour remained a utopian aspiration; and contemporary kibbutz ideology and practice seem to have abandoned it altogether. By 2004, 67% of the workers in kibbutz industry were not kibbutz members; and in that same year almost 70% of the income of the kibbutzim was derived from industry.³

One of the characteristics of the kibbutz as a post-utopian society is that, since it is governed by a system of face-to-face democracy in which each of the members has an equal right to participate, it has from time to time to reconsider its aims and objectives - in other words, its preserved or revised utopian ideal. So what, in this perspective, is the current status of the agrarian ethos?

It may first be remarked that, despite the remarkable growth of industry described above, none of the veteran kibbutzim (those founded before the year 1990, which constitute the overwhelming majority of today’s

² Haim Barkai, *Growth Patterns of the Kibbutz Economy*, Amsterdam, NY, Oxford 1977, p. 190; Avraham Pavin, *The Kibbutz Movement: Facts and Figures*, (Hebrew), Ef’al, Israel 2006, pp. 38, 40, 41. The total kibbutz population in that year was 116,300; ibid., p. 12. These figures have not changed significantly since that year.

³ Ibid., pp. 49, 52.
kibbutzim) has abandoned its agricultural holdings, or all of its agricultural economic branches. Moreover, these kibbutzim are still considered, and consider themselves, to be rural settlements, even though several of them are situated on the borders of, and a handful virtually within the bounds of, urban areas. And a number of significant traces of the agrarian ethos may be noted:

Kibbutz culture is to a great extent based on the Jewish religious year. But the traditional festivals have been remolded, in order to emphasize (in some cases even to create) their non-religious significance as nature festivals, delineating the cycle of the agricultural year: times of sowing and harvest, climatic changes and the like are given precedence over the primarily religious aspects of such festivals as practiced in the Jewish Diaspora or in orthodox communities. Thus, for instance, the Feast of Weeks (Shavuot) which is traditionally celebrated as the time of the Giving of the Law (to Moses on Mount Sinai) is marked in most kibbutzim as a harvest festival: the members and their children are conveyed by the tractors or other conveyances of the kibbutz in a procession through the fields in order to re-acquaint them with the work being done and the crops being grown; dances symbolizing the change of seasons and the gathering of the crops are performed; and readings from the Bible and other Jewish literary works emphasize the same theme. This sometimes leads to paradoxical situations: for instance, the dates of the Jewish agricultural year, crystallized in Biblical times and unchanged since then, are quite often inappropriate to contemporary agricultural practice: the harvest festival may be celebrated at a time when the main crops of the kibbutz have been yielding their produce for several months; and a special field may have to be sown and saved for the festive cutting of the “first” sheaves. In my own kibbutz the cultural committee, after many years of celebrating the harvest at an unrealistic time, decided to replace the traditional forms of celebration with an exhibition of the huge agricultural implements now in use - tractors, ploughs, implements for feeding cattle, and the like - which rolled past the assembled members and impressed them no less than the traditional trip through the fields. The dancing and singing which accompanied this display were all centered on the joys of spring, the harvest, and the wonders of nature; but on the following day all the members were taken on a guided tour of the new building of the kibbutz’s industrial enterprise.

Another, more problematic, aspect of the change in attitude to the agrarian ethos is in the field of education. Kibbutz education in general has always been humanistic, favoring a broad conspectus of learning with a considerable admixture of opportunities for artistic pursuits and the development of artistic skills, rather than being focused on the acquisition of technical knowledge and skills. On the other hand, agriculture has always been a part (albeit usually a minor part) of the curriculum; and the children have been required to work, at younger ages in their own “children’s farm”, and later in the agricultural branches of the kibbutz, until, in their final year at school, they are working a full day every week in the kibbutz farm. But the developments outlined above have made
HENRY NEAR

this arrangement seem anachronistic and wasteful: anachronistic because it is widely acknowledged that the great majority of the children will not work in agriculture in their adult lives; and wasteful because this supposedly vocational training could, and in the opinion of many should, be supplanted by subjects more relevant to the reality of the twenty-first century and the needs of the kibbutz: computer skills, for instance, at a higher level than those provided in the normal curriculum.

This tendency has come to fruition in one aspect of the present state of the kibbutz movement. For several years now the great majority of kibbutz-born children have not been returning to their places of birth after their army service: they opt for a variety of university studies, and settle down away from their original homes. The veteran kibbutzim, therefore, face a serious demographic problem, as the average age increases and the economic and social burdens of those managing the kibbutz and working in its various enterprises (including its agricultural branches) are increasingly heavy. The result is an increase in the number of hired workers (including managers from outside the kibbutz). This, together with a number of other factors, has led to deep changes in the system in some two-thirds of the kibbutz movement, amounting in many cases to the abandonment of the basic tenets of the classical kibbutz. In reaction to this trend, over the past two decades there have grown up a number of small communal groups which claim to return to the pristine values of the kibbutz; and many see in them the true future of the kibbutz as a communal movement.

There can be no doubt that these groups are utopian, in the sense defined above. They have a clear vision of the ideal society they are striving to build, which is in many respects a replica of the classical kibbutz: they maintain the principles of equality between the members, intense face-to-face democracy, and communal control of the members’ incomes and expenditure. But virtually all of them have abandoned the agrarian ethos. They do not derive their livelihood from a jointly owned farm - or, indeed, in most cases, from jointly owned economic enterprises of any sort; their members work mainly in education and in various forms of social work among the under-privileged sectors of the population, and pool the income they derive from these occupations. They are, in fact, more similar to the communes of America and Europe than to the classical kibbutz.

The fact that most of the veteran kibbutzim have undergone a fundamental change in their way of life and livelihood does not mean that they have foregone the utopian element in their thoughts and actions: on the contrary, the very fact of change, and the need to anchor it in formal decisions preceded by a wide-ranging series of discussions, brings the utopian element to the fore; for they are compelled to substitute a new version of their ideal (in many kibbutzim formulated as a “vision” of their social aims) for their previous utopian concept - whether, at the time of the change, they saw this concept as a past golden age, as a near-perfect present, or as an aim for the future.

In very few of these “visions”, however, does the agrarian ethos specifically appear. Some of them speak of the “quality of life” and of
ecological objectives, but agriculture, if it is mentioned at all, appears simply as one of a variety of means of livelihood - one which is likely to continue to exist, since the kibbutzim already own considerable tracts of land, and have the equipment and know-how to make a profit from it. But, lined up against other means of livelihood, agriculture is having increasing difficulty in proving its financial worth; and the fact that many kibbutzim have devoted large tracts of formerly agricultural land to building projects is a clear indication of this. And in this respect the “communal” kibbutzim - the minority who remain faithful to the classical kibbutz social structure - are no different from the “privatized” majority.

Historically, then, the agrarian ethos has undergone radical transformation during the history of the kibbutz, now almost a century long. Beginning as an integral part of its founders’ vision, it was superseded by a vision of an integrated industrial and agricultural society - a vision which was in large measure realized. But economic developments in Israel and the world led to its gradual abandonment, until today there is no part of the kibbutz movement in which agriculture is seen as any more than a complement to a mainly industrial and technological economy, and sometimes not even that. In the conceptual scheme mentioned at the beginning of this article, the agricultural ethos has become utopia abandoned, parallel to the act of leaving the kibbutz; and industry forms part of the future economic utopia of the greater part of the kibbutz movement, with the exception of the young commune-type communities, which implicitly reject the aspiration to create an independent productive economic structure.

This transformation has not yet been completely assimilated into the educational and cultural systems of the veteran kibbutzim. In these, it may be said that in respect to the agrarian ethos utopia has become nostalgia.