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To cite this article: Reuven Shapira (2016) Rethinking reverence for Stalinism in the kibbutz movement, Israel Affairs, 22:1, 20-44, DOI: 10.1080/13537121.2015.1111640

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13537121.2015.1111640

Published online: 01 Feb 2016.
Rethinking reverence for Stalinism in the kibbutz movement

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ABSTRACT

The reverence for Stalinism by the main kibbutz movements, which through revolutionary rhetoric helped perpetuate leaders who had reached the dysfunctional phase, was wrongly interpreted. Historians missed leaders' efforts to induce reverence and its use for their domination, while social researchers missed its enhancement of oligarchic rule. These are explained by the suppression of critics at the hands of a co-opted functionalist scientific coalition, by ethnographers missing the impact of inter-kibbutz organizations, and by the differentiation of disciplines. Multiple ethnographies of kibbutzim (pl. of kibbutz) and inter-kibbutz organizations and the integration of various findings by a good theory exposed these failures. They point to the required integration of disciplines and to the need for reform of scientific publication decision-making aimed at preventing such failures.

KEYWORDS Inter-kibbutz organizations; reverence for Stalinism; dysfunctional leaders; oligarchy; dominant scientific coalition; co-opted functionalist researchers

Introduction

The complexity of large organizational systems helps leaders mask the self-perpetuation of their dysfunctional domination. If researchers do not penetrate this complexity and untangle the changes in leaders' practices from their early effectiveness, they are bound to make major mistakes. The one exposed in this article is a major ideological change, the etiology of which was missed by both co-opted functionalist social scientists who lacked a historical perspective and by historians who lacked sociological theory.

Such a major failure seems strange in the case of kibbutzim, very likely the most studied of small societies. However, social scientists have found plausible reasons for such failures. Ethnographers found managers concealing or camouflaging the truth about their mistakes, misdeeds, and failures, while
Goffman revealed how positive façades were crafted. Berger pointed out that understanding a society is possible only if its formal facade is penetrated. However, penetration might fail if such a facade has been crafted by powerful tenured leaders and is defended by their loyal heirs. Since Machiavelli’s days it is known that leaders often rule by ruse, camouflaging reality and masking the stratagems with which their positive images are created and as Foucault has proved by control of societal knowledge they defend such images. Might it be that social scientists failed to penetrate the egalitarian and democratic facade of the kibbutz system, lacking the historical perspective of the old-guard leaders’ change from democracy to oligarchy? Did kibbutz leaders carry out, early on, a camouflaged ideological change that enhanced their power and oligarchic rule and did researchers miss both the change and its significance? Where oligarchic rule survives for decades, criticism is rare since radicals and critics are censored, suppressed, and eliminated by denying them rights, rewards, and promotion, until they either exit or become loyalists or turn mute. If some 80‒84% of kibbutz members left, including most of the critics of kibbutz leaders, it is possible that dominant researchers did not meet critics of the oligarchic rulers, and particularly not those who opposed the ideological changes enacted decades before to perpetuate the leaders’ dominance.

An ideological change can be decisive when a successful leader of a radical egalitarian and democratic movement reaches the dysfunctional phase. In that phase, the leader loses prestige and power due to mounting unsolved problems and his weak position often invites competing leaders to try and replace him (masculine language is used because all leaders studied were male). If the latter threaten his primacy he can use autocratic practices: centralizing control, weakening of democracy, promoting only his loyalists, censorship of publications, and privileging himself and staff, in accord with Michels’ ‘Iron Law of Oligarchy’. Then he can adopt revolutionary rhetoric that creates a radical image and masks conservative oligarchic practices. Although oligarchic practices ruin mutual trust with activists as they lose trust-creating discretion, the revolutionary rhetoric may make up for the loss of trust. Autocratic conservative rule tends to deter joiners and harm adaptability, but in a communal movement the autonomy of communes may retain local critical thinkers and innovators who solve problems and adapt the communes to internal and external changes. The leader’s dysfunction creates a leadership vacuum which innovative mid-level officers may enter, solve major problems, innovate, and lead to prosperity. Prosperity may lead to factionalism, but also to the leader’s empowerment and hence to using powers to mask a self-perpetuating ideological change.

Even ethnographers often find it hard to penetrate such a mask, as a major difficulty of ethnography is to ‘perceive the context of phenomena, as it is often seen as a self-explanatory … it is spoken of only in hints’. The kibbutz is a complex system: in 1985, at the peak of success, there were some 128,000...
people in 269 communes with many thousands of hired employees and 250–300 inter-kibbutz organizations (I-KOs) with 15–18,000 hired employees administered by 4–4500 kibbutz members called pe’ilim (i.e. activists; numbers are inexact due to a lack of research; see below). The two main kibbutz federations called the Movements had 2400 pe’ilim with some 800 company cars, while 11 regional I-KOs had about 1200 pe’ilim with some 1100 cars. In other I-KOs a few pe’ilim administered many hired employees; the two largest had approximately 3500 and 1400 hired employees. All I-KOs used non-egalitarian and undemocratic practices, mostly led by tenured oligarchic heads, but even ethnographers who alluded to the conformist practices of pe’ilim missed their roots in oligarchic I-KOs, which they did not study, while historians who studied I-KOs ignored their oligarchic practices. The rift helped missing leaders’ use of extreme ideology to camouflage conservative dysfunction and legitimize self-perpetuating autocratic measures.

**Leaders in dysfunctional phase shifted to reverence for Stalinism**

The extremism under study, known as leftism, consisted of the veneration of Stalinism by the two major Movements, the Kibbutz Mechad (KM) and the Kibbutz Artzi (KA), which comprised some 80% of the kibbutzim and their members at the time. The two were innovative at first, and established I-KOs that enhanced the kibbutz cause: youth organizations in Europe that educated for kibbutz pioneering, teacher’s colleges, publishing houses, daily and weekly newspapers, journals, printing presses, financial firms, and more. Their heads, KM’s Yitzhak Tabenkin and KA’s Me’ir Yaari, initiated leftism in 1937 and 1939, after 14 and 12 years in power respectively, as their powers were threatened (see below). However, at that time the two Movements were radically social democratic, in accord with the radical egalitarian ethos and culture of kibbutzim, and they had used Marxist-Leninist rhetoric, though not its practices, to prevent absorption by oligarchic social-democratic Mapai led by David Ben-Gurion and Berl Katzenelson.

While the thesis presented here is novel, students agree that leftism was a major mistake and caused the political and social isolation of the KM and KA, harming their leading societal role, and causing crises, splits, and dissolutions which greatly weakened them. While the KM and KA played major roles in the establishment of the State of Israel, they remained in political opposition during its formative years due, to a great extent, to their leftism and to a belief that Ben-Gurion’s government was doomed without them so that he would soon ask them to join on their own terms. They were proved wrong, and Mapai coalitions with religious and rightist parties enabled Ben-Gurion’s continued oligarchic dominance while weakening the KM and KA, which after six years in the opposition joined the government on Ben-Gurion’s terms. Thus, leftism is significant beyond kibbutz society and culture, and helps to explain oligarchization of Israeli politics.
Leftism contradicted radical democratic socialism practised by the early kibbutzim. The latter was rational and critical of capitalism, trying to create a better and more just society by adopting the principles of collectivism, democracy, and egalitarianism. Up to the mid-1930s, both KM and KA had been truly democratic: Major Movement decisions were reached by regular councils, three to four a year, of kibbutz representatives chosen by each kibbutz, after kibbutz assemblies discussed the issues to be decided by the council. Representatives convened with leaders and pe’ilim at one of the kibbutzim in large gatherings that also involved locals and members of adjacent kibbutzim. At that time the higher status of leaders and pe’ilim was not symbolized by any privilege, insignia, or special title; many pe’ilim were rotated back to their kibbutz after a few years of service; and Stalinists were suppressed and ousted. Tabenkin and Kibbutz Ein Harod Artzi, KM’s predecessor federation (established 1923), fought leftists of the Gdud Haavoda Movement in 1926-1927. The KA was established by graduates of Hashomer Hatzair youth movement; its struggle against leftists in the Warsaw branch in the mid-1920s ended in the expulsion of about 40 members, while such struggles in some young KA kibbutzim in the early 1930s ended in the exit or expulsion of many, and splits in kibbutzim. In 1934 Hazan called the USSR ‘a destructive force within the working class’, and in 1937 the KA called for an international investigation of the Moscow trials, a clear anti-Stalinist move. Thereafter Tabenkin and Yaari needed almost a decade of leftward pushing to induce leftism, and only after the reversal of Stalin’s anti-Zionism in 1947 did their push win the support of KM and KA secretariats. Even then, KM’s ex-Secretary-General Yisrael Idelson (later Bar-Yehuda) opposed leftism ‘as a most prominent member of the [KM] leadership’, representing it in the headquarters of the clandestine Resistance Movement, and ‘the assumption that KA members were leftists proved wrong … most kibbutzim (and especially the veterans [larger kibbutzim]) were rightists.’

Tabenkin’s leftism commenced in 1937: everyone was criticizing Stalin’s show trials including the KA secretariat, as cited, except for Tabenkin and most of his students in the KM’s activist seminar. In 1939, the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact was censured by all KM leaders except for Tabenkin and one deputy, while in the KA it was censured by most leaders including Yaari’s partner Hazan, but supported by Yaari who prevailed after a debate of some months. In 1940, after the imperialist nature of the Pact was exposed by USSR invasions of its neighbours, Tabenkin reversed his reverence and criticized USSR’s ‘imperialistic socialism’, while Yaari criticized it as ‘Machiavellian’.

In 1942 the two leaders renewed leftist preaching, while Mapai sought Soviet support for the Zionist struggle against Great Britain and invited Soviet diplomats, who met Yishuv leaders. In a meeting with them Yaari proclaimed: ‘We will not achieve full national and social redemption without … an alliance with the forces of the World of Tomorrow’, i.e. the USSR. In 1943–1944 the diplomatic romance advanced, the Soviet Union promised help for Jewish
immigration to Palestine and its representative in London proposed that ‘the Jewish nation should be allowed to continue building the Land of Israel as its national homeland’. Then Tabenkin presented Stalin’s murderous collectivization in a positive light, and depicted it as an ‘alliance between Stalin and the peasantry’. Stalin was vindicated in KM’s youth movement seminar, and growing reverence for the USSR led to a split between KM and Mapai supporters. Soon survivors arrived from the partisan war in Eastern Europe and their memoirs exposed the brutal anti-Semitism and chauvinism of Stalin’s commissars, but Yaari and Hazan censored out these chapters of survivors’ books which the KA published.

Leftism won wide support only in 1947, after Stalin shifted to support the UN Palestine partition plan which buried KM’s and KA’s unrealistic ideas. The political distress caused by the victory of Mapai’s realistic approach drew the KA and the KM closer, and in January 1948 they combined into the Mapam party which identified itself with the USSR and the Soviet bloc. This was a terrible political mistake which greatly harmed them, and alienated them from most Israelis, who rejected Stalinism. Even more serious, it played into the hands of their rival Ben-Gurion: He cast doubt on their national loyalty and overcame opposition in Mapai to the dismissal of their members from high offices. The Palmah, the democratic and egalitarian army which the KM had established and which kibbutzim had nurtured, was disbanded, the best of the 1948 war commanders who leaned towards Mapam were side-lined and discharged, Mapam was pushed into the opposition, and the Histadrut educational system – in which Mapam had a large stake – was dissolved.

Tabenkin’s deputy Ben-Aharon has said: ‘There was not one trap which Ben-Gurion set for us that we did not get caught in’, while historian Near concluded: ‘KM and KA leaders managed a policy ... fundamentally mistaken. They caused irreparable rift in one movement, ruined the life of many members, and barred development of tens of kibbutz communities’.

**Historians’ explanations do not stand up to close scrutiny**

Historians noticed these failures, but their explanations belittled leaders’ abilities, failing to explain how such experienced, astute leaders had fallen into these traps. For historians, leftism had not been a deliberate move but rather leaders had drifted into it to extricate the Movements from ideological and political complications created by Marxist ideas which they used against Mapai’s unification pressures, and because they were swept away by the glory of the USSR victories and by its increasing support for Zionism.

No doubt the above did facilitate leftism, but neither the timing of the two leaders’ switch to leftism nor other facts support historians’ explanation of drift. Tabenkin became leftist in 1937 and Yaari in 1939, six and four years before the Stalingrad victory when the Moscow trials and the pact with Hitler...
were exposing Stalin’s dictatorship at its ugliest, when Yaari’s KA secretariat demanded international socialist investigation of the trials. Secondly, leftism might have solved some complications but, very experienced of Stalin’s cynical and horrific policies, they defined his regime as ‘imperialistic’ and ‘Machiavellian’, and were cognisant of ‘how deeply rooted anti-Zionist policy was among the USSR and its allies in international communism’.

Leftism has been presented as a gradual and natural outcome of the Marxist approach, but if this is so, why did almost all deputies, likewise Marxists, not support it until 1947, why did KM’s General Secretary Idelson continue opposing it, and why did most KA members reject it in 1953? All the above facts prove that Stalinism was neither a gradual nor a natural move and aroused continuous opposition which was defeated in 1948 but resurrected in the early 1950s. Tzachor has asserted that in the 1930s Hazan was brought to ‘a growing admiration for the USSR … [leading] to an almost blind support of Stalin’, but, as has been mentioned, in 1939 he opposed the Stalin‒Hitler pact. In 1942 Yaari had resumed leftism and published a leftist book, then Hazan quickly published a competing book, writing: ‘The shadows of USSR dictatorship are many; it imposes a heavy yoke, it maintains rule with a heavy hand’ and ‘its rulers … are always endangered by corruption’. His book failed and he also failed in opposing Yaari’s motion to establish KAs’ party (see below), so that after the Stalingrad victory he surrendered and joined Yaari. However, even after Hazan had joined Yaari’s version of leftism, most of their deputies still opposed it and so they became mute.

Thus, Tabenkin and Yaari needed great effort, tactical retreats, and a turn-around in USSR policy to impose leftism. This long and intensive struggle was inexplicable as simply an effort to disentangle themselves from the ideological complications with which they had, up to then, coped quite adequately. Instead, the advance of the oligarchic process from the mid-1930s explains leftism as an effort at self-perpetuation by dysfunctional leaders.

The oligarchic process in KM and KA leadership from the mid-1930s

Kibbutz social scientists have evaded signs of oligarchy in KM and KA leaderships, just as they ignored the study of I-KOs (hence the minimal data), concealing their anti-kibbutz principles and the thousands of privileged I-KO pe’ilim whose exposure would have ruined the egalitarian and democratic image of kibbutzim. This evasion commenced early on: in 1944 KM leaders vehemently rejected Landshut’s seminal study because of his critique of a KM policy. Then Professor Buber, head of the Hebrew University’s Sociology Department, published a functionalist book in 1947 (English translation 1958), in which he mentioned I-KOs in only two neutral sentences, ignoring I-KOs’ violations of kibbutz principles: prolonged oligarchic tenures for leaders and
deputies, weakened democracy, centralization, conservative dysfunction, reverence for a dictatorship, censorship of publications, and privileges to leaders and staff (see below). Buber’s book was celebrated by kibbutz leaders, who made it a must-read in kibbutzim as it legitimized avoidance of study of I-KOs by later students. Until Tabenkin and Yaari vanished in the early 1970s no one exposed I-KOs’ anti-kibbutz cultures and their leaders’ dysfunction and suppression of critics and innovators.

Only in 1984 did Beilin reveal how Yaari and Hazan suppressed a group of young KA leaders who, beginning in 1953, criticized their leftism and conservatism. Criticism of Yaari and Hazan and the ensuing influence of the group were enhanced in 1956, as Khrushchev exposed Stalin’s crimes, and as Hungarian democracy was brutally suppressed. Then Yaari resorted to a Machiavellian tactic, and Hazan, who had nurtured some of the group members, eventually surrendered and supported him. They destroyed the group’s solidarity by obligating them to accept several leftists who initiated discussions on ‘USSR socialism’, which curtailed the group’s influence in kibbutzim while suppressing its critical and innovative members, especially the gifted radical leader Efraim Reiner, who subsequently left.

In 1989 Kynan exposed KA leaders’ earlier dysfunction: in 1949–1950 they rejected all new proposals put forth by kibbutz managers for new methods of immigrant absorption, although this was Israel’s main problem. Ben-Gurion attacked the kibbutzim for not helping solve it, while initiatives by the moshavim absorbed many immigrants. Ultimately, kibbutzim stuck with a problematic, old, and limited method, called Hevrot Noar (youth groups), and when Kibbutz Gan Shmuel solved the main problem of this method, the Hevrot Noar discrimination versus kibbutz youth, Yaari and Hazan’s negative attitude prevented other kibbutzim from following suit.

Tabenkin’s dysfunction was no different: Although he agreed to two innovations, they largely failed, due to his conservative rejection of any change which would have enhanced immigrant absorption. Historian Kafkafi wrote:

At the KM Convention social realities in kibbutzim were not discussed at all… the objective realities did not interest Tabenkin, and so he did not invest any effort in finding solutions or carrying out reforms … [KM’s secretariat] proposals were impractical and contradictory.

Even earlier, Tabenkin’s deputies ‘lost patience, trying to steer through the maze of his conflicting proposals’; some were illogical, and others were clearly unrealistic and ignored.

In accord with oligarchy theory, in 1951 Yaari identified himself with the KA and Mapam, declaring at the KA Central Committee: ‘I, Meir, am Mapam. I am Hashomer Hatzair. I express the historic trajectory of Hashomer Hatzair’, while encouraging a cult of personality among his supporters. Though Mapam was a parity union of KA and KM, Yaari’s intoxication with power led KA Stalinists to dominate its activity, causing a series of crises and failures until its split in
1954.\textsuperscript{60} This was true of Tabenkin as well: a deputy who criticized his decision to split Mapam resigned and did not answer his letters. Tabenkin came to his kibbutz, angrily broke into his house, took a chair and, banging it on the floor, broke it, shouting: ‘What do you think I am [more] important to our Movement than Lenin was to Russia?’\textsuperscript{61}

Oligarchy theory predicts centralization of control and decline of democracy. At first major decisions were made in frequent democratic councils of kibbutz delegates, but from the mid-1930s such meetings were deferred for a year or so and leader-nominated councils replaced them, while intervals of Movement conventions stretched into 3–7 years.\textsuperscript{62} The theory predicts increasing privileges appropriated by the leader and his officers. In the 1920s–1930s, only a few KM and KA activists had privileges: those who held high offices in the Jewish Agency, the Histadrut (federation of labour unions and socialist movements), and its subsidiaries.\textsuperscript{63} However, in the 1940s Movement executives were also privileged, receiving monetary allowances and company cars which kibbutz members could not use when they stood idle. In the early 1950s Yaari and Hazan obtained large and fancy chauffeured American cars, similar to Cabinet ministers; Tabenkin’s was smaller but he kept this privilege after formal retirement in 1961.\textsuperscript{64} Such was the case with leaders’ private telephones and other privileges that contradicted their preaching on modesty.\textsuperscript{65}

\textbf{Leader dysfunction and suppression of creative deputies}

Oligarchization is clear, as is its contradiction to kibbutzim’s radical ethos. But oligarchy is conservative, while leftism was a change. Is there not a contradiction?

Not at all, as leftism did not change any kibbutz practice except its ideology and politics, while camouflaging the conservatism of dysfunctional leaders who opposed new, creative solutions to problems. As found in other large and successful cooperatives,\textsuperscript{66} the fast-growing kibbutz system required creative solutions to maintain democracy and egalitarianism, but as leaders suppressed critics and innovators, conservative capitalist practices crept in:

1. Capitalist-like I-KOs: New I-KOs were established in the cities rather than in kibbutzim as in the past, and surrounding norms were adopted. The leaders did not object, and soon transferred Movement headquarters to Tel Aviv. In Tel Aviv, at first officials had no privileges, but gradually more and more privileges appeared.\textsuperscript{67}
2. Capitalist-like industry: From 1940, many kibbutzim established workshops and plants with capitalist practices: hired labour, autocratic management, privileges for managers, and more. The leaders denounced hired labour but not other capitalist practices which they themselves
used; only from the 1960s did local innovators instil kibbutz principles in many factories, while a few I-KO innovators led the provision of the necessary funding.  

3. Declining collectivism and egalitarianism in kibbutzim: In addition to I-KOs and the industry breach of these principles, breached egalitarianism the salaries of thousands who had served in the British army, the personal possessions beyond the kibbutz level of urban middle-class joiners, and more. Previous solutions were insufficient and significant gaps appeared, but the leaders suppressed creative problem-solving. Worse still, heads of economic I-KOs legitimized inequality by instilling capitalist values.  

4. Diminishing democracy in kibbutzim: In addition to the Movements’ centralization and the weakening of democracy, the size and complexity of kibbutzim and I-KOs impaired direct democracy. Serious problems emerged: low attendance at general assemblies, a minority of attendees voting, repeated debates, no respect for decisions and their violation, and domination by cliques. The leaders evaded these problems, which pointed to the need to return power to kibbutzim which leaders had taken away by centralization and weakening of democracy. Worse still, local kibbutz leaderships declined through the promotion of successful and talented officers to I-KOs and their replacement by inferior ones; this served the leaders’ interests: the promoted became their loyalists and subdued the inferior replacements, defeating their efforts to solve problems innovatively.  

Leaders’ dysfunction was clear. It may be argued that they did not solve problems, being too busy with rapid growth, but this was not convincing after 1939, when problems mounted while growth slowed due to a lack of immigration from Europe: in 1933‒1939 the number of kibbutzim increased by 122% versus 77% from 1939‒1945. Moreover, if they were busy, why would they suppress creative innovators instead of letting them solve problems? Clearly, successes by the latter would have accentuated their own ineptitude and diminished their authority. In the 1920s to early 1930s innovation was encouraged, but already in 1935 Tabenkin suppressed Ein Harod innovator Gershon Ostrovski, who was one of KM’s founding leaders and headed its delegation to Poland. In Poland he had successfully and innovatively led the Halutz Movement that doubled the KM in two years; he ‘stood up against the heavy pressure of Jews who tried to emigrate … one who had to improvise solutions so that the flood of people into the Halutz would not ruin the system’. Naturally, he expected another high office, but after returning in 1935 he criticized Tabenkin and his loyalists for violating egalitarianism and democracy; he was sent back to the ranks and later left. His close friend David Maletz remained and the KM publishing
house refused to publish his novel *Cycles* (published by Am Oved, 1945), which inter alia criticized Tabenkin’s privileges.\textsuperscript{76}

Yaari similarly suppressed Mordechay Shenhabi, whose innovations enhanced the success of many KA kibbutzim. Until 1942 Shenhabi helped by Hazan repeatedly overcame Yaari’s efforts to impede his efforts at innovation, but in 1942 he gave up as Hazan stopped support in order to spare himself one conflict with Yaari to help overcoming his leftism, and Shenhabi proceeded to found the National Holocaust Memorial Museum ‘Yad Vashem’ in Jerusalem.\textsuperscript{77}

**Dysfunctional leaders only solved a few national problems up to 1942**

Oligarchization is a process, and a leader may turn conservative in one sector but not in another where he can enhance his power. In 1937, Hazan helped Shlomo Gur of Kibbutz Tel Amal to create the ‘Tower and Stockade’ system which enabled 53 Jewish settlements to be established despite Arab resistance.\textsuperscript{78} In 1939, Hazan initiated KA alignment with the Shlonsky group of anti-Stalinist urban authors and poets, gave them a literary section in KA’s weekly journal, and employed them in its publishing house. These authors had no previous connection with the KA, but as they opposed the literary establishment headed by Bialik, whom Mapai had adopted, an opposing alliance was beneficial to both sides.\textsuperscript{79} In 1942, Tabenkin renewed the Palmah, which the British had set up in 1941 but disbanded, as a kibbutz-based, underground Hagana and Yishuv army. In return for the soldiers’ work, kibbutzim provided sustenance, hid weapons and arms production plants, and their youth movement graduates filled the army’s ranks.\textsuperscript{80}

Leaders’ dysfunction in the national arena commenced earlier on other subjects. In 1937 they faced a challenge: the British Peel Commission proposed the division of Palestine into Arab and Jewish states, and most Zionist leaders adopted this solution. Tabenkin opposed it irrationally; at first, he ‘found himself holding and discarding various solutions, up to contradiction’, and then he proposed an international mandate, although this alternative had never previously existed.\textsuperscript{81} Yaari proposed a bi-national state, which also had never succeeded anywhere before, while Hazan supported him without believing in it.\textsuperscript{82} KM’s urban political partner, Faction B, opposed Tabenkin’s idea,\textsuperscript{83} and it seemed that, like Hazan, most members did not believe in the proposals of the two leaders but did not actively oppose them. However, even more clearly dysfunctional was Tabenkin when facing in 1942 the challenge of Ben-Gurion ousting the KM from Mapai. Then Tabenkin became paralysed, ‘let Ben-Gurion do whatever he pleased’, was ‘dysfunctional … [and] influencing [likewise] those around him’; in 1943 ‘the paralysis he suffered … continued’ until he decided on a counter-move in 1944.\textsuperscript{84}
How did the turn to leftism serve leaders’ survival?

While it was clear that leaders’ growing dysfunction paralleled efforts to induce leftism, how exactly did leftism serve their power?

First, revolutionary rhetoric suited their specialization in oral and written discourse, masked their conservatism, and presented them as devotees of radical socialism. Secondly, leftism swept the KM and KA away from Ben-Gurion’s Mapai, and negated its unification effort aimed at absorbing them. Thirdly, it strengthened leaders by Stalinism legitimizing autocracy, centralization, weakening of democracy, power continuity, censorship of publications, and privileges. But according to Wolf’s analysis, it served them even more by radically changing the cosmic world view so that their superiority became independent of their deeds.

Wolf studied extreme ideologies and concluded that it is better to deal with such foundational ideas in terms of their functions in society. They can be shown to be legitimate and justify forms of rulership. At the same time, these functions anchor rulership in a cultural structure of imagining, which … postulates cosmologies; cosmologies in turn, articulate ideologies that assign the wielders of power the role of mediators or executors on behalf of the larger cosmic forces and grant them ‘natural’ rights to dominate society as delegates of the cosmic order.85

In the leftist cosmic order, Stalin was the ‘sun of the Nations’ and the USSR was the centre of socialism and its highest form, the yardstick of kibbutz communism, rather than kibbutz successes compared to other communities; it demoted both kibbutz successes and unsolved problems to secondary importance. Leaders’ authority was no longer harmed by dysfunction, as it was based on their ‘role as mediators or executors representing the greater cosmic powers which grant them “natural rights” to prevail in society’, as Wolf stated. They were likened to Admors (acronym of ‘our lord, teacher, and Rabbi’) in Hassidic courts, spiritual leaders, and prophets of Leninist deceptions – such as Tabenkin’s assertion that faith was more important than knowing the truth.86 This status was independent of election, and a Bolshevik ‘guided democracy’ enhanced their rule and legitimized autocratic practices.87 They were supposedly above mundane Movement problems, though, in practice, they made every major decision and interfered in minor ones as well. In accord with Hughes, they assigned low-prestige, problematic tasks to aides whose failures did not harm their positive image, while strengthening their status and power.88 Hazan opposed this, but submitted to Yaari.89 Tabenkin ‘threw out ideas which others [had] to implement’, proposing to set up an ‘alliance of the Kibbutz Movement’; and notwithstanding objections to the idea, it failed primarily due to Tabenkin’s lack of effort at implementation.90

The political situation encouraged Tabenkin’s Stalinism

Now let us examine the political situation that encouraged leftism and explain its timing. The dominance of both leaders was being menaced by the success
of competing leaders, while their dysfunction diminished followers’ trust, making their authority vulnerable; this made the threat to their supremacy real, encouraging the leftist solution.

The campaign for unification of the kibbutz movement which Katznelson had started in 1935, threatened Tabenkin’s KM leadership. As the KA firmly opposed the idea, the only real partners were the two Mapai-leaning Movements: the KM, in which Tabenkin’s supporters were 60–65%, and the smaller Hever Hakvutzot, in which Tabenkin had no supporters. Thus, Katznelson aimed at dethroning Tabenkin, turning his KM majority into a minority in a united Movement. The idea of unification had much appeal among the rank and file; hence, the KM secretariat, consisting of Tabenkin loyalists, tried to prevent its discussion at the 1936 Yagur Convention but failed, and one-third of the delegates supported it. Subsequently, support gained momentum, so Tabenkin instead proposed an ‘Alliance of Kibbutz Movements’ to unify only some functions of the Movements. But as ‘everyone understood why Tabenkin suddenly needed this “alliance”’ – that it was due to his Yagur defeat – it failed. Then he initiated the 1937 leftist seminar for activists, mentioned above, in which the KM was likened to the USSR: both were governed by ‘centralized democracy’, had been ‘a society built on rule from above’, and if that of the USSR was wrong, that of KM would have to be as well. The ‘cruelty’ of the KM to its pioneers, such as the poor conditions in work training camps in Poland, was compared to the cruelty of the USSR, but without a word about the fate of its victims. For example, the USSR was not a dictatorship, free speech reigned there, and more such deceit.

Such deceptions are not needed by an effective leader who is fully trusted by followers since his decisions have proven successful and have solved major problems, and his high morality and vision give them inspiration for further efforts and solutions; they are needed by a leader who has been weakened by dysfunction and whose status is in danger. Tabenkin’s defeats in Yagur 1936 and the ‘alliance’ of 1937 threatened his power, and this explains his adoption of leftist at the height of Stalin’s despised show trials. Alas, his opponents won by a small margin at the 1939 Naan Convention, despite Tabenkin’s four-hour speech. He then used his last resort, a resignation that regained him the upper hand since almost all KM pe’elim were his loyalists who called him back, as the opposition had no candidate to succeed him; the only one of his calibre, Eliezer Livenshtein (Livne), had already left after his suppression similar to Ostrovski.

Tabenkin was also weakened by the KM’s specific unsolved problems, in addition to the common kibbutz problems. Rapid growth had for years caused a lack of housing for a third or more of the members. Turnover was problematic; there was mass influx and some half of the newcomers exited after a short period. This made managerial planning difficult and caused a lack of worker proficiency. Heterogeneity was a problem; for instance, some newcomers wanted a semi-religious, semi-secular kibbutz. The heterogeneous KM had a homogeneous
leadership and centralist economic decision-making which preferred growth over minimal human needs,\(^{98}\) causing considerable distrust of the dysfunctional Tabenkin, as his failures at the two KM conventions signalled.\(^{99}\) His resignation and return saved his power; then Katznelson's unification campaign died out, the KM was ousted from Mapai, and after two years of Tabenkin's paralysis the KM founded an unsuccessful party.\(^{100}\) However, Tabenkin's power benefited from Palmah successes and thereafter no one challenged his primacy.

**Hazan opposed Yaari's leftism, failed and surrendered**

Yaari also used leftism due to weakening, in his case caused by the success of co-leader Hazan. Tzachor described their twin leadership as ‘an alliance … with an ever-present element of disagreement’.\(^{101}\) Yaari had been KA leader since its inception in 1927. Hazan had been a deputy who became co-leader from 1932 when Yaari, a successful ideologue, failed to manage the growing KA and called Hazan to help. He succeeded as an organizer and popularizer of ideas, but the two disagreed on a major strategic issue: Yaari aspired to an independent KA party, while Hazan envisioned that such a party would have to be leftist to attract disenchanted Mapai supporters, and therefore sought a truce or even a merger with Mapai.\(^{102}\) He was more critical of KA leftist leaders than Yaari and tried to suppress them, but Yaari retained their status after they had rebelled, failed, and become docile.\(^{103}\) They served Yaari's rule: With them he cultivated the image of being the only one who could steer the KA without falling into either leftism or rightism, becoming a supposedly indispensable leader in accord with Ansell and Fish's explanation that a leader becomes indispensable if he symbolizes the movement and his authority seems essential for its survival and success.\(^{104}\)

In 1936 KA urban supporters established the Socialist League and the KA aligned itself with it, a partial victory for Yaari. However, the terrorist campaign of the Arabs radicalized the Yishuv against them and damaged the KA's position as it had sought compromise with the Arabs. Yaari was more seriously harmed, as Hazan was more militant towards Arab terrorism, while Yaari's preaching seemed misplaced.\(^{105}\) Hazan was also strengthened by the success of the ‘Tower and Stockade’ innovation that he helped invent, and by using the bi-national state idea to attack Mapai.\(^{106}\) Then, by the 1939 leftist support for the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact which Mapai had denounced, Yaari took the lead in the struggle against Mapai and achieved supremacy by defeating Hazan's critique of the Pact. In 1940 he tactically retreated (‘USSR was Machiavellian’), appeasing Hazan and other opponent;, but in 1942 leftism was renewed, as has been noted, and in addition to Hazan's book failure, he failed to oppose Yaari's motion to establish the KA's party.\(^{107}\)

Thus, Hazan adopted leftism in 1943 because of repeated failures in the struggles against Yaari in 1939 (Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact), 1942 (the party), and 1943 (the book). Yaari proved to be unbeatable and Hazan surrendered;
further conflict with Yaari would have endangered his status, Yaari could have
demoted him. He preferred to retain status and wait for a political change,
which came in the early 1950s: he led the expulsion of leftists who had sup-
ported the anti-Zionist Prague trial and nurtured Reiner and his colleagues who
were criticizing leftism, until he gave in to Yaari and helped to crush them, as
has been noted. He gradually succeeded Yaari from the late 1960s but never
admitted that the past leftism was wrong.108

Why Mapai was not attacked from a socialistic-democratic
standpoint

An additional question which should be asked is why Tabenkin and Yaari turned
to leftism instead of attacking Ben-Gurion’s undemocratic rule through the oli-
garchic Histadrut (the federation of labour unions and socialist movements)
which employed Mapai pe’ilim in privileged jobs.109 As this negated socialist
ethos, Tabenkin and Yaari could have demanded the abolition of privileges as
a precondition for unification, damaging the appeal of Katznelson’s campaign.
Moreover, this would have enabled them to better align with Mapai’s internal
urban opposition, Faction B, which opposed Ben-Gurion’s rule; in 1935 they
had aligned with it and had defeated Ben-Gurion in a Histadrut referendum.110
Why did they not choose this direction again?

The answer once again stems from oligarchic dysfunction. This direction
would have been credible only if Tabenkin had democratized the KM in accord
with the Livenshtein and Ostrovski critique and demands, and if KM pe’ilim
in the Histadrut and Jewish Agency had refused privileges. Mapai had tried
to co-opt opposition of KA in the Histadrut by giving out privileged offices
to leaders’ deputies, as in Zionist organs; for instance, Hazan was a director of
the Jewish National Fund.111 The KM had more such jobs, and Tabenkin and
Yaari themselves travelled bi-yearly to Zionist Congresses in Europe as a part of
Histadrut delegations.112 Additional obstacles to critique were I-KOs and kibbutz
industry’s capitalist practices. Thus, a critique of Mapai from a social-democratic
standpoint would not have been credible unless kibbutz organs had themselves
adopted social-democratic practices. But this would have meant forsaking priv-
ileges by which the two leaders obtained docile deputies and pe’ilim, and, worse
still, allowing critical creative deputies like Ostrovski and Shenhabi to invent
these practices might have gained them prestige and power. Leftism, on the
other hand, enabled criticism of Mapai without these ‘troubles.’

How did historians miss the leftist turn and its historical
significance?

Historians are supposed to expose and analyse historically significant turn-
ing points, but in this case a decisive turning point was missed. Leftism was
depicted as a continuation of the Marxist approach, and the leaders seemed to have just been swept away. However, critics exposed oligarchic phenomena as early as the 1970s. So why did students not use their findings to explain leftism by oligarchy theory? One explanation is illogical but common: the separation of the social sciences and history. Without oligarchy theory the findings were not integrated into a whole which would accentuate the significance and etiology of leftism. Historians studied leaders and politics while ignoring ethnographies that exposed oligarchies in both kibbutzim and I-KOs, missing how prime leaders served as patrons of these oligarchies, which by loyal support empowered and retained the leaders.

Historians have an alibi: Dominant social scientists preceded them in ignoring I-KOs’ oligarchs, having adopted the research paradigm of communal societies as if the kibbutz resembled these societies, which do not have I-KOs. Until the 1990s only two sociologists and one ethnographer – that is myself – studied two types of I-KOs, out of the hundreds that existed, and these sociologists ignored oligarchic phenomena and other I-KO violations of kibbutz principles. Likewise, kibbutz ethnographers ignored I-KO jobs which enabled continuity of pe’ilim and their local dominance in kibbutzim.

Then the Hebrew University’s functionalist sociologists became the dominant scientific coalition in kibbutz research and also ignored I-KOs and the oligarchic rule of their heads, so no question was raised concerning their roots. They ignored or suppressed ethnographies which exposed oligarchies in kibbutzim. These either remained unpublished or were published only in Hebrew; hence, later studies ignored them. For instance, Evens studied Yaari’s Kibbutz Merchavia, depicting eight status categories, but without citing Yaari’s supreme status above them all as the oligarchic ruler of the KA.

**Conclusions**

For the two leaders, the turn to leftism was a striking success, affording extra-long tenures, dominance, privileges, and ample prestige which was largely faked. For the kibbutzim, leftism was ruinous, as has been partially analysed. Full analysis has proven that kibbutzim’s oligarchization, enhanced by leftism, ruined cultural uniqueness. The interest in how leaders coped with the ideological complications of leftism prevented exposure of how they profited from it. The simplistic explanation that they had just drifted into leftism has been disproved by a detailed study which was prompted by suspicions regarding leaders’ aims in light of ethnographies which exposed I-KO oligarchies. Critical historians exposed the oligarchic phenomena in the Movements, but without using oligarchy theory and not alluding to oligarchies in other I-KOs and kibbutz industry they missed the oligarchic process, its timing, its etiology, and its pertinence to leftism. The other main reason for this failure was domination of a co-opted
functionalist scientific coalition which evaded I-KOs, according to leaders’ wishes, and failed to penetrate their mask of serving public aims.

However, even critical ethnographers who defied this coalition only partially exposed oligarchization, depicting local kibbutz oligarchs but not alluding to powerful I-KO heads who nurtured them by promotion to privileged and prestigious I-KO jobs. Ethnographers’ partiality was explicable by their failure to ‘perceive the context of phenomena, as it is often seen as a self-explanatory … it is spoken of only in hints’,124 and by the dominance of the functionalist scientific coalition which ignored I-KOs: as ethnographers have not studied I-KOs, they could not integrate oligarchic signs in senior pe’ilim they met at kibbutzim with I-KO oligarchies and grasp leftism’s support of leaders’ oligarchic rule. Without untangling the system’s complexity by ethnographies of both I-KOs and kibbutzim, ethnographers missed the roots of kibbutzim’s local oligarchies in oligarchic I-KOs.

Erroneous interpretations of mistaken ideologies are inevitable,125 while the exposure of the true etiology of leftism has ramifications beyond the kibbutz history, explaining differently the major struggles of the Israeli socialist movement, in the late pre-state era, and the Israeli state. The kibbutz movement played a decisive role in the pre-state era, and might have played a similar role in the state’s formative years had democracy replaced leaders when they entered dysfunction phase. Had this taken place, both leftism and leaders’ utopian solutions to the Arab–Jewish conflict might not have been adopted by KM and KA; kibbutz principles could have reigned in its industry and I-KOs, as they did in the Palmah; co-optation efforts by Mapai would not have threatened leaders, who could have counter-attacked Mapai’s oligarchic leaders from a social-democratic standpoint. The disbanding of the Palmah and the Histadrut educational network might have been prevented and leftism crises avoided. Kibbutzim would have initiated new ways to absorb immigrants, and would have retained their servant elite status; Israeli history would have been very different if the turn to leftism had been prevented by means of democracy and replacement of dysfunctional leaders.

In 1947 Buber’s book mentioned the lack of kibbutz principles in I-KOs in two neutral sentences that prompted followers to evade I-KOs’ oligarchic practices and to miss how leftism masked their conservative dysfunction. Leftism raised leaders’ status to delegates of a new cosmic order heralded by the USSR, demoting kibbutz problems to secondary importance and legitimizing leaders’ extra powers, continuity, and privileges. Leftism enhanced the suppression of creative radicals who then left or turned to outside careers and/or became mute. By studying radicals’ failing careers, ethnographers could have learned about their suppression by local conservative oligarchs and about oligarchic I-KO heads’ support of suppression. Alas, they did not, although every journalist knows he must seek the views of critics and those who are subdued and/or have exited. Leftism and oligarchic rule bred mass exit of the disenchanted, but
ethnographers did not seek them out to hear their suffering from both phenomena unlike education student Sabar. Hearing them helped me untangle the system’s complexity, the impact of leaders’ power, and how dysfunctional leaders’ dominance caused mass exit and Hirschman’s pruning of critics which deprived students of informative critique.

An ethnographer of complex organizational systems must consider the power leaders have to divert or block their efforts, and must seek to overcome stratagems designed to prevent exposure of the truth about leaders’ functioning and aims. Informal methods make it easier to evade barriers set up by leaders, but the danger exists of missing the effects of contexts, and not finding one’s feet in a complex field to properly interpret cultures. Ethnographers must suspect that, due to leaders’ barriers and camouflages, predecessors have missed a critical sector and events which were problematic for the leaders, and to study them. This may expose cultural rifts which highlight the significance of phenomena. A home ethnographer who is a part of the studied society may imagine that they are aware of its contexts, but in a multicultural, fast-changing and complex system, they may be mistaken. For instance, one context that affected kibbutzim was adjacent ‘development towns’, and to understand their effects their cultures required ethnography as performed by Marx but not by kibbutz students. Another example is the historical context: the pre-state Jewish community was an ideological and highly value-laden democracy; thus, it was alienated by anti-democratic leftism. Worse still, Tabenkin and Yaari did not admit that it was wrong even after 1956, furthering public alienation to the detriment of kibbutzim; but this had not been studied.

Wallerstein calls for integration of disciplines by ‘historical social sciences’ and the present case supports it; integration is essential but is difficult to achieve due to different academic backgrounds and research methods. In addition, much history is written in the spirit of the leaders who have shaped it. Thus, it is essential to find the small amount of critical historical material and integrate it with one’s own ethnographies of different parts of the complex system, as well as with other findings, and with the help of a good theory, in accord with psychologist Kurt Lewin’s famous remark about its practicality, one may penetrate leaders’ masks and camouflages. However, the right theory may be found in another discipline; thus, more interaction and integration among disciplines by new solutions is called for.

Another problem of social sciences must also be addressed in light of the suppression of critical kibbutz researchers: Like leaders and their loyalists who defend the masks, early students tended to defend their findings against later critical disproof. In this manner, the kibbutzim’s hegemonic scientific coalition defended evasion of I-KO’s and oligarchic rule, preventing true explanation of leftism. Collins exposed the problem of such hegemonies in 1975, but his exposure did not change publication decision-making norms in the social sciences: Disagreement among reviewers still leads to rejection; hence, one
member of a hegemonic coalition among reviewers can be enough to block exposure of its mistakes. A reform of this method is required to limit conservative hegemony of scientific coalitions. This may be done by adoption of the method of natural sciences: when only one reviewer agrees with an article, it is not rejected but is reviewed by an additional scholar.

**Acknowledgements**

The author thanks Haim Shferber, Emanuel Marx, Gideon M. Kressel, Einat Libel, Naama Kedem-Hadad, Nir Resisi, Sergey Gornosteiev, Barbara Doron, Martin Kett, Henri Near, Daniel De-Malaach, Uri Izhar and anonymous reviewers of earlier versions of this article for their helpful comments.

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

**Notes**

10. Shapira, “Institutional Combination.”
13. For a brief discussion of I-KOs, see Shapira, *Transforming*, Ch. 6.
15. For a similar rift between organizational research disciplines, see Bate, “Whatever Happened.”
35. Ibid., 203–4.
37. Ibid., 66, 72.
43. Zait, *Khalutzim*, 120.
44. Ibid., 208.
48. Ibid., 123.
50. Kressel, “Hakdama.”
54. Beilin, *Banim*, Ch. 5; Shapira, *Transforming*, 185; Personal knowledge as a member of Reiner’s kibbutz and as his student in KAs Seminar Center and the Ruppin College.
55. Ben-Artzi, “Kibbutz or Moshav?”
63. As this negated kibbutz egalitarianism, it was never mentioned in print, but has been told in veterans’ interviews; for instance, in 1990 interview in Kibbutz Ramat Yohananan with David Kahana, who served as a Histadrut subsidiary official in 1930.
70. Cohen, “Khevrat Hyekhidim.”
74. Ibid., respectively, 389, 395, 389–90.
78. Interview with Shlomo Gur, Tel Aviv, 1992.
81. Ibid., 433, 523.
84. Ibid., 513–21.
88. Hughes, *Men and Their Work*.
90. Kanari, *Tabenkin*, 412, 408 respectively.
97. Ibid., respectively 395, 374, 386, 371–2.
100. Ibid., 521, 539; Zait, *Khalutzim*, Chs. 6, 8.
102. Ibid., 150–52, 158–9.
103. Ibid., 153–4, 218; Kafkafi, “Dfusay Manhigut.”
104. Ansell and Fish, “The Art.”
106. Ibid., 161–2.


114. Bourdieu and Wacquant, An Invitation, 90.

115. See note 113, and Shapira, Anatomy; Shapira, “Rotatzya.”


117. Shapira, Transforming, Ch. 1.

118. Khermesh, “Hashpa”ot Hasviva”; Rosolio, Hamivne Ha”ezori.


120. Ram, The Changing Agenda. E.g. Collins, Conflict Sociology, Ch. 9; Platt, Realities of Social Research; Platt, “Functionalism and the Survey.”

121. Ben-David, “Bikoret”; Shepher, “Kibbutz Sdom Ve”amorra.”

122. Evens, Two Kinds of Rationality.


125. Zoloth, “Mistakenness.”

126. Ben-Artzi, “Kibbutz or Moshav?”

127. Sabar, Kibbutz L.A.


130. Hazan, Hasiakh Ha”anthropology, 29.

131. Shapira, “Becoming a Triple.”


133. Wallerstein, The Uncertainties of Knowledge.

134. Collins, Conflict Sociology, Ch. 9.

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