

TRANSFORMING KIBBUTZ RESEARCH

TRUST AND MORAL LEADERSHIP IN THE RISE AND DECLINE OF DEMOCRATIC CULTURES

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Synopsis

The Kibbutz, Israel's most original social creation, has become the most successful of all communal societies as a radical social movement that has been highly socially involved by numerous federative organizations that influenced the wider society while being influenced by it. Unlike other successful communes that insulated themselves from their surroundings, the Kibbutz societal involvement engendered profound problems, but scholars did not treat them; nor did they treat the essentially non-democratic and unchanging higher echelons of Kibbutz leaders whose control of these organizations enhanced the movement's bureaucratization, oligarchization and conservatism. As these organizations adopted low-trust, low-moral cultures contrary to Kibbutz high-trust cultures and high-moral leadership, exposure of their cultures could have spoiled the kibbutz image of a progressive society. Researchers followed leaders' efforts to prevent this, almost did not study these organizations, ignored their conformity to societal cultures and their negative impact on kibbutz cultures, missing major problems caused by this impact. The thorough analysis and understanding of the structural tensions underlying the Kibbutz movement as a whole will make it possible both to overcome its current crisis and revitalize some of its few remaining high-trust parts, and to use its lessons for the invigorating of democratic work organizations elsewhere.

Recommendations

1. The Israeli kibbutz is the world's longest running experiment in alternative ways to structure democratic societies. As uniquely important as the kibbutzim are, surprisingly little has been written about them in English in recent years that is authoritative. Dr. Reuven Shapira corrects that shortcoming in this thorough account of eighty years of history and transformation of the kibbutzim. The book corrects many mistaken popular notions about the nature and practices of these communal societies. What is particularly useful for those who live in the capitalist democracies of Europe and North America is that the author shows how the learning from this great social experiment can be applied to our understanding of leadership and management of all organizations, including business corporations. Dr. Shapira writes with great passion and deep knowledge.

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2. Dr. Reuven Shapira's comprehensive testing of sociological methods in studies of kibbutzim, disproves their findings hence, scares the utopist away. Scholars' delusions and subsequently employment of misleading measures buttressed the veracity of "new [egalitarian] societies". Disrespect to unobtrusive divergence of rewards, owed to officeholders, set a few of the members distinguished in fringe benefits, power and status. Once officeholders learn to

reset in power, the constitutional rights of comrades vary, letting a surreptitious power order strike a root. Rotational succession of officers proved a negative practice, aggravated power inequality and helped patrons' continuity, ruining foundations of communal equality and direct democracy. Positivism, objectivity and authenticity of participant observers are therefore meditated anew. Dr. Shapira's work is the first methodical sum up of some 70 years of sociologists', anthropologists' and historians' attempts to fathom the kibbutz experiment, starting with Dr. S. Landshut (1938).

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3. First Israeli kibbutz was established a hundred years ago. During that century it engendered voluminous political, ideological and scholarly literature. Now comes Dr. Reuven Shapira and argues that most of these writings misunderstood essential aspects of the kibbutz. In particular, they did not treat the essentially non-democratic and unchanging higher echelons of kibbutz leaders and the numerous extraterritorial organizations and enterprises controlled by this elite. Nor did they fully grasp the fact that the kibbutz has never sought to set up a utopian society. It has always been integrated in the wider society and shared many of its norms and beliefs. The national kibbutz leaders who controlled and manipulated its ideology remained outside the accounts, largely because they spent most of their time away from their home kibbutz. They worked from offices located in Tel Aviv in the vicinity of the government centre. ...The impact of the external world on the kibbutz participation in the world was consistently ignored in the research literature ...[that] treated the kibbutz as a social isolate. The consternated reader may well ask: how can it be that three generations of kibbutz students missed the true nature of these phenomena, and only one scholar got it right? I argue that this may well be the case: It is not unusual, even in scholarly work, for totally misconceived mental constructs to persist. Indeed, any scholar who, like Dr. Shapira, tries to change long-established academic conceptions must be prepared for a long uphill struggle that will not necessarily succeed.

Dr. Shapira was born and bred in kibbutz Gan Shmuel, has lived there most of his life, and while he teaches in Western Galilee Academic College in Acre, he and his family still reside in Gan Shmuel. He is also deeply committed to the kibbutz way of life. Can such a person rise above the deeply engrained self-evident beliefs embodied in daily praxis, and critically examine his own community? The answer is not to be sought in Dr. Shapira's undoubted capacity to distance himself from his situation, but rather in his burning desire to reform the kibbutz and make it again viable. This has been the energy driving a research project that has occupied his full attention for over thirty difficult years. His devotion to the kibbutz has not blinded him to its failings. There is an obstinate spirit in him that drives him to get to the root of matters, and the intellectual honesty to face up to unpalatable realities. In his search for the truth Dr. Shapira wrestles with the complex data and constantly revises and checks his arguments, sometimes producing a dozen or more drafts, till he is satisfied that he has got the right answers. Both the academic community and the kibbutz members are deeply obliged to Dr. Shapira for having written this erudite and profoundly practical study.

Prof. Emanuel Marx, Professor Emeritus, Sociology and Anthropology Dept., Tel Aviv University, Israel.