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A New Socialist Vision and the Israeli Experience

Perhaps more than any other experience, the Israeli experience, and the initial vision of the Labour movement, is very close to the new face of socialism that people are searching for in the West and in the East after the disillusion with the existing socialist models. It was basically a utopia but a realist utopia and a constructive utopia striving to create a participatory self managed society. A decentralist, pluralist society where many different types of socialist and cooperative organisational and communal forms were living and coexisting together. I believe that this type of pluralistic, non-uniform socialist society is at least a starting point for a vision for the future.

From this point of view the particular kibbutz experience should be understood as a part of a whole scale of different socialistic attempts. They differ in regard to their position on the scale and on the degree of comprehensiveness of the socialist experience and their degree of radicalness in realisation of different socialist egalitarian principles.

On this scale we have first the large labour economy that comprises 25% of the Israeli economy. The comprehensive labour economy is divided in a public sector based on administrative management and on public ownership by the whole working class, and in a cooperative sector. This sector is based on cooperative ownership of the members, and in one area of the Israeli economy, in the area of transportation, this is the leading form of organisation. But we have also diverse forms of production - cooperatives and very large consumer and credit forms of cooperatives.

At the same time we have, what comprises perhaps the uniqueness of the Israeli experience, the cooperative communities, which are based not only on a limited area of cooperation in one aspect of social and economic life, but on comprehensive communal life. Here we have three different degrees. We have the Moshav, which has a limited cooperation. It is based on nationalised land and initially on an egalitarian distribution of the means of production, on cooperation in marketing, on cooperation and mutual help in different other areas. However the production units are private, individual and based on individual households.

We have the Moshav Hashetufi, the collective Moshav, which is a much smaller movement than the individual Moshav movement. There are around 400 Moshavim, but only around 30 collective Moshavim and they present a combination between a collective economy, which is run like that of the kibbutz and a private household.

And now we have the most integrative form and the most radical attempt to achieve values of equality, of social justice, and of democracy - the kibbutz. We could perhaps assume that those forms that are less demanding, less based on what may seem to be rigid principles of equality and cooperative organization, would be the most successful, the most efficient, and the most popular.

I want to try to test this very common-sense type of assumption. We have to start our analysis with the creation of the State. This was a period of a large expansion of the labour economy. By the way a conventional thesis is that the labour economy was created mainly because there was no Jewish State before, so that the labour economy had to compensate for its absence. But in spite of this thesis the main expansion happened really after the statehood. This was also the period in which the Moshav, originally a minority sector of the cooperative agriculture, became the largest, majority sector. Large numbers of immigrants were immediately sent to new settlements that were organised in this special cooperative way.

On the other hand, after the first ten years of statehood the kibbutz was in a profound crisis. There were five years between '55 and '60 where there was no real addition to the kibbutz membership and population. It was a period in which there were no new settlements. This was a period where it seemed that agriculture has finished its role because after a period of scarcity there was a period of agricultural surplus. There was a kind of general questioning, both outside the kibbutz and inside the kibbutz whether or not the kibbutz will be able to deal with the new challenge of the State of Israel. There were assumptions that it will not be able to industrialise or that it will not be able to introduce new technology and science, since at this time almost no kibbutz member was sent to an institution of higher learning.

There was also a deep feeling of crisis because it seemed that with the new State there is no more need for the pioneer spirit and the role of the kibbutz.

In spite of this crisis situation, the period of the '60s was perhaps the main test of maturity, not only in the history of the kibbutz movement but also in the history of communal movements in the world.

As is probably known, during the 19th century almost 100,000 people have lived in communes, in communities in the United States, but only some religious communities have lasted. Except for them no-one succeeded in building and maintaining a multi-generational society. Some became affluent, but this was the end of their collective organisation. During the '60s the kibbutz changed from a unigenerational society to a multi-generational society; from a society where the family has a very limited role, to a society where the family is a very important social and cohesive element; and from an agricultural society to a mixed agricultural and industrial society. Factories are today the source of 65% of kibbutz income. At the end of the '60s large numbers of younger people started to go to institutions of higher education so that today the percentage of university educated people in the kibbutz is higher than in Israel in general, which in comparison with other societies has quite a high percentage of people with academic training.

Today there is a general feeling of economic crisis in the kibbutz as a part of the general crisis in the Israeli productive sector, that resulted from a deflationary economic policy of very high interest rates. In the case of the moshav and of the kibbutz the crisis is also a result of a deliberate policy of the right wing parties to exploit this situation to weaken the labour movement. In spite of this crisis situation, it is important to remember the following figures: Between '76 and '96 the growth of the kibbutz population was 30%. For the first time after the creation of the State, the relative decrease in the kibbutz population stopped (It was a relative decrease because of the large waves of immigration). It is a small increase in its share of the Israeli Jewish population from 3.2 to 3.6 but the meaning is that the growth of the kibbutz is quicker than the growth of the overall population.

The increase in agricultural production was 12% which means that the share of the kibbutz in the total Israeli agricultural production rose from 36 to 40%. The kibbutz industrial production increased by 75% and the share in the overall industrial production from 4.7 to 6.8%.

It is interesting to see some other comparative measures. The Governmental Statistical Institution developed an index of agricultural efficiency. This index for the moshav is 27, for the collective moshav 39, for the kibbutz 57. It is an index of the efficient utilisation of the invested capital.

There are comparative data for '86 between the kibbutz industry and the general Israeli industry. On the index of productivity of labour the kibbutz is 28% higher than the overall industry.

On the index of productivity of capital - 30%; the share of exports in the general sales - 60% higher than in the overall industry. It is one of the paradoxes of this crisis that while consumption is rising very fast overall in Israel, the kibbutz, which is one of the most productive sectors, has decided to decrease its consumption to handle its financial difficulties. I believe that this is a transitional situation.

I want now to point to those issues which I think are the main socialist achievements of the kibbutz. This is not to say that in each area there are not limitations and problems. But first the achievements will be briefly described and analysed.

What is more important - economy or power? Should socialism be mainly an alternative to the economic inequalities or to the inequalities in power? I believe that the starting point of the kibbutz and the secret of kibbutz socialism is neither in economy nor in its power arrangements, meaning its self management arrangement. The secret of the kibbutz is in two things. An Israeli well known economist said the secret of the kibbutz economy is in its ideology. I would say the secret is both in its ideology and in its community, in its social basis. In the fact that the kibbutz is a transparent, non mediated community where we deal with people, with whole people, with persons, not with categories of people, not with functions, with social roles or with class divisions. And those interpersonal relations - create the commitment to the communal goals, they create the basis for the integration of the economic, the social, the cultural and the educational aspects of kibbutz life, and they also create in principle the opportunities for complete and far reaching sex role equality.

There surely is significance in the special economic arrangements, and I believe that the most important economic arrangement is the dissassociation of work and need satisfaction. The kibbutz attempts to realise as much as possible the famous slogan: from each according to his abilities and to each according to his needs. It means that motivation to work and motivation for participation in public activities are not based on extrinsic material motivation but on intrinsic and community oriented motivation. It means that the distributive justice is not based on an arithmetic or mechanical conception of equality, but it is person oriented and need oriented.

The kibbutz principle of social ownership is a distinction between the kibbutz and the cooperative arrangement where you have to buy a share and receive your part in the accumulated capital when you leave the cooperative. In the kibbutz you have not to pay for membership and as long as you are a member you have an equal right both in participation in decision making and in enjoying the fruits of the common property.

Self management and participatory democracy of the kibbutz is based not only on the weekly general assembly but on the network of committees, in which every year almost half of the members take part, and on the principle of rotation of leadership positions. I believe that those together with the economic principles of the kibbutz can explain the uniqueness of the kibbutz phenomena in avoiding the iron law of oligarchy, that operates even in many voluntary cooperative, and socialist ideologically and politically oriented organisations.

This is worthwhile mentioning especially because the kibbutz is not only an experiment in micro-socialism: the kibbutz is connected to a large federative and regional network. These are organizations which have a very far-reaching mutual help system and are based on ideological principles. These organizations can be seen as a model not only of micro-socialism, but also of some more macro, far reaching social and political arrangements.

In the particular Israeli situation they function as buffer mechanisms between the kibbutz and the surrounding society and the surrounding capitalist market. They provide the special combination between openness towards the general society and a necessary isolation from its capitalist components, which is needed for the development of cohesion, integration and commitment.

The solutions suggested by the kibbutz experience are not only economic solutions, nor are they only political or social solutions. They are part of a far reaching attempt to achieve de-alienation in almost all the areas of social life.

But we should not forget nor ignore the limitations and the problems. We have to learn from the different socialist experiences not only their achievements, but also their costs and their limitations - for each experience we can mention these costs and limitations. When we speak about the community, the comprehensive community, there are problems of pressures toward conformity. There are problems of the balance between the individual and the family on the one hand and the necessary social cohesion of the kibbutz on the other. There are the limited achievements and the problems in the area of sex role equality. When we speak about the specific dissociation between work and need satisfaction we have problems resulting from a lack of a market mechanism for work allocation. There are alternative mechanisms that work, but they are much more complex than the mechanic of the market. We have problems in the definition of the needs that the kibbutz has to satisfy, but we can overcome them as a person-oriented community. We have problems of motivating people to participate in the direct democracy assemblies and committees and the average of participation in a regular assembly is no more than 25% or 30%. But

it should be noted that these are weekly assemblies, not the assemblies once in a year of a cooperative or of a trade union chapter. So these are some of the limitations and there are other limitations in the activities of the federations, and of the regional organization.

From this point of view I think it is possible to reach a more general conclusion as to the possibility of de-alienation. I suggest the use of the concept of dialectic of alienation and de-alienation. We cannot assert that by creating a kibbutz, or a cooperative, we have thereby created a structure which will once and for all overcome alienation. It is a permanent struggle where you have to be aware of new developments, of new phenomena that might endanger your achievements. However, if you are aware of these issues, you are able to find new solutions, new ways to overcome the contradictions and alienations.

This is perhaps the main lesson that we can learn from the kibbutz experience. There are three ways of learning from the kibbutz. One, is to see the kibbutz as a model, as an existing model, and as socialists, we must learn from all the models. The kibbutz surely cannot serve as an overall model, but it can serve as a limited model in the areas of cooperation, especially its agricultural economy, in the area of industrial democracy and in areas of education. Today the kibbutz communities are a model in another very important area: aging without retirement, aging with the right to work. These are the kinds of limited areas where it might be possible to learn in many ways from the specific achievements and problems of the kibbutz.

There is another area where it is difficult today to say something definitive, and this has to do with alternative futures. There are controversies whether or not we are dealing with a new technological revolution and with a post-industrial society. But there are no doubts that today there are more open alternatives, more than in the past. There is no deterministic development. There is a choice between options, between a technocratic society, a society based on unemployment, on great social gaps, on a new kind of Tayloristic division of labour, or a society that can use these new technologies in a humanistic way, that can show that small can be efficient, not only beautiful, that can show that decentralisation can work and that we not need huge bureaucratic, state like machineries. The community can be a base not only for social life but also for a new integration between social, economic and cultural activities. Andre Gorz gave to one of his books dealing with this issue the title: *The Road to Paradise*, I do not think that we can speak about the paradise, but I believe that for a choice between these options it is possible to learn from the specific experience of the kibbutz. But the main lesson that I think can be learned from the kibbutz experience is that not too much can be learned in a concrete way. The most important lesson is to see the kibbutz as a source

of inspiration, as a demonstration that it is possible to realize - even partly and with failures - a far reaching social vision, a far reaching utopia. In this era of negative utopias and irrationality this is perhaps the most important lesson.