

The “Kibbutz” as Reality and Utopia: Mimesis and Representation of a Cultural Concept

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A. REALITY.

As a linguistic term the word *kibbutz*¹ refers to a category consisting of ca. 300 collective settlements of various forms, from a small intimate community located in a city to huge collective agricultural and industrial farms (or small towns), in which ca. 130,000 people live (2.6% of the Israeli population). The variety of forms is, and has always been both a synchronic and a diachronic phenomenon. Yet, from the founding of the first kibbutz in 1909 to the present, there is a definite movement away from a commune (i.e. a small radically cooperative and experimental group which constantly strives for social intimacy, and while defining itself against the rest of society sees itself as a national avant-garde) and toward a communal village (i.e. a form of economic and social community which is willing to accommodate a normal range of people in normal times).² But at all times and in all forms these communal cooperative settlements have been organized on the basis of the following principles:

1

Collective ownership of land and all other means of production, as well as [most of] any other kind of property (such as public buildings, cars, recreational facilities, etc.). The most important historical change in this respect has been the introduction of private property into a system which originally refused to tolerate it: at first only very personal items (like clothing) became private, then small household articles (e.g. wall decorations, books); later on furniture, and, following that, all household commodities (such as refrigerators, TV sets, personal computers, etc.). Today kibbutz members can own private cars and there are discussions (even in the Israeli Parliament) concerning the transfer of homes and apartments from communal to private ownership.

2

Equality and cooperation in production, consumption and education. In all three areas there have been major changes:

i. Equality and cooperation in production used to be manifested in three ways: job rotation (in particular managerial positions); duty rotation in service (non-professional) work; general "recruitment," on top of the regular work load, for seasonal work. All of these seem to be disappearing in the name of professionalism and efficiency. The almost total elimination of seasonal "recruitment" and the marked decrease in duty rotation were made possible by allowing hired labor into the system, in violation of the original principle of self-sponsored work. However, since the hired workers are not members of the kibbutz, this does not contradict the principle of a classless society in the same direct way as a permanent distribution of work.

ii. Consumption has been moving towards total private regulation. Whereas in the past each individual kibbutz decided not only how much money each member was to spend on clothing, food, recreation, travel, and so forth, but actually dictated the very kinds of food or clothing, at present all members receive an equal amount of money for personal consumption. In a growing number of kibbutzim [the Hebrew plural form for kibbutz] even food consumption has been privatized to the partial or total elimination of one of the prototypical attributes of the kibbutz: the communal dining-hall.

iii. Education remains the economic responsibility of the community and its funding is still decided according to individual needs (and not by equal distribution of funds). However, its goals have changed—the desire to create a new type of person, socialist by nature and inclination, has ceased to exist—and in conjunction with the changing material conditions, kibbutz education has lost its singularity. The disappearance of "children's houses" and their replacement by day-care centers, regular Western type kindergartens and regional schools signifies in the strongest way the shift of the educational responsibility from the community as a whole to the child's parents.

3

The community's total responsibility towards the well being of its members. This principle which secures the same standard of living to all members, regardless of their physical or mental abilities and actual contribution to the economy of the community as a whole, held strong for 85 years. It used to be summarized in the slogan: From each—according to his ability; To each—according to his needs, which many

people inside and outside the kibbutz movement regard as the *sine qua non* for a community to be recognized as a kibbutz. Some of its practical manifestations are now being challenged and this is taken to signal the end of the Kibbutz in its original form and cultural function.

B. UTOPIA.

As a cultural concept the term *kibbutz* refers to a model of an actualized utopia, admired as successful by some—many until the last two decades, mourned or mocked as a failure by others. One could begin to prove this claim with typical titles of books and articles: *Venture in Utopia* by Melford Spiro; "Utopia and Politics: the case of the Israeli Kibbutz" by Helen Antonovsky; *Paths in Utopia* by Martin Buber; "The Kibbutz: Utopia in Crisis" by S. Diamond, etc. One could continue by quoting sociologists, who study the kibbutz as a model society.

"one of the most visible and recognized utopias of the modern age—a vibrant, existing system of cooperative communities oriented toward the amelioration of human life..." (Blasi, 1980. p.v). The Kibbutz "solves social problems by changing social relations. It is built on mutual commitment and obligation among a group of people,—It calls for grouping human activities under 'one roof,' encouraging people to conduct most of their affairs within a fellowship based upon consistent rules, similar reference groups, and little hierarchy, and thus opposes the fragmenting tendency of modern society. It prescribes mutual aid that is free once the intention for fellowship is present; this costs little, requires minimum administrative supervision, promises a sure profit, and is something to which most people believing in its virtues can adapt themselves." (ibid. p. xvi)³

Studying the relationship between the "real thing" and the utopian cultural concept, we'll be looking at a set of paradoxes and/or tensions, all of which derive from the basic paradox of an actualized utopia. We shall glance at the difficulty of representing the reality of the kibbutz experience by and to people who cherish the utopian concept, and focus on two sets of poetic problems caused by these paradoxes: a. the construction of a representational model on the basis of conflicting repertoires (fictional and realistic); b. the transformations of these representations, their uses and functions, as a consequence of changing relations between reality and the cultural concept.

B.1. UTOPIA REPRESENTED: TWO EXAMPLES.

B.1.i. The best place to look for clear-cut representations of the Kibbutz-as-

Utopia would be a major system of hegemonic cultural transmission. Children's literature is one such system (or used to be when this poem was published in the early 40's).

ZE'EV/IT IS VERY GOOD IN EIN-HAROOD

It is very good
In Ein-Harood—
There's no money there:

Carts go by,
You want a ride?—
Just say "halt!"
The guy stops,
He even lets you hold the reins
And there it ends.

Do you care
Some grapes to share?
You need not even ask.
The vinyard you find
And in the shade of a vine
You sit
You pick
And you eat.

The shoemaker there for the tailor
Makes shoes.
The tailor—a coat
For the shoemaker sews,
And trousers with pockets
To the blacksmith he offers.

The gardener brings tomatoes and peas
The milkmen add some milk and some cheese,
The farmer brings wheat for the baker to bake
Brown bread, and white Hallah, and even a cake.

There
All
Eat their meal together
Dance the Horah together—

It's indeed very good
In Ein-Harood.

(my own translation for use in this conference. Wishing to maintain the original rhyme scheme as closely as possible, I changed the name of the kibbutz slightly. The poem refers to Ein-Harod, founded in 1927, the first large kibbutz).⁴

This representation manifests some of the best known characteristics of Utopia. Ein Harod is cut off from the rest of the world, though this is not manifested geographically (as in Thomas Morus' *Utopia* and in Voltaire's "Eldorado") but economically. Like these well known western examples the Ein-Harodian economy is an absolute autarchy. The members constitute a homogeneous group of people, as do the original inhabitants of *Utopia*. Since they like the same things, share "the same language, customs, institutions, and laws," they do everything together. In contradistinction to some prototypical utopias (e.g. Plato's *Republic*), but in accordance with many socialist ones, all the members of the kibbutz are manual laborers. In this pioneering utopia there is no room for intellectuals or for people practicing bourgeois professions. Therefore it is not necessary to circulate tasks as do the inhabitants of *Utopia* and as kibbutz members used—or were supposed—to do.⁵ The catalogue of various professionals, all of whom contribute to the well being of a community—typical in literature for this age group (first graders) during the pioneering stage—can be retained without detracting from the utopian representation. The poem's Ein-Harod is also a place of affluence. Its streets are not paved with gold, as in Eldorado, but money, as in *Utopia*, has been abolished. The ultimate image of fulfilled eschatological dreams occupies the center of the poem. This is the Biblical image of a man sitting under his vine, fearing no master (there is no need to ask anybody's permission for anything), and in true Edenic manner taking his fill without effort (the addressee can pluck the grapes sitting in one place). No wonder the poem culminates in a circle of content happy dancers.

B.1.ii. During the pioneering period (incidentally, another cultural myth) the utopian representation is not limited to reading materials for naive children. It can be found—albeit with some necessary emendations—in simplistic romantic realistic novels (defined as fictional narratives situated at an identifiable historical time and place and related by an omniscient narrator), and is quite acceptable to otherwise sophisticated readers because of its accordance with their cultural concepts and shared beliefs.

Our second example is a relatively late specimen of this genre: a short novel by Yehuda Burla, published in 1954, appropriately entitled *The First Swallow*.⁶ It tells the story of the first Moslem—an Iraqi woman, the granddaughter of a national hero from Dagastan (Chechnia)—who joins a kibbutz.

As dictated by the genre, the kibbutz, which the heroine joins, cannot be cut off from the rest of the world. Yet the waiting period before she can join it, her apprehensions, and the detailed description of her thoughts during the trip from the city of Haifa to the kibbutz create the desired effect of a difficult passage. Economic autarchy is not referred to, but can be construed from the diversity of tasks and the minimal reference to the outside world. The latter is limited to the political events and an attack by Arabs during the War of Independence. The novel includes many descriptions of proto-typical elements of the kibbutz (e.g. dining-hall, children houses, fields and groves). But of greater significance is the lengthy and repetitive presentation of the kibbutz's national and social utopian roles. These two, the heroine's very reasons for joining the kibbutz, are actually the major cultural functions of the Kibbutz as a utopian concept.⁷

C. A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW.

Since for lack of time we cannot follow in detail all the developments in the relationships between the cultural construct and the reality, nor the changes in the composition and the function of the artistic representations of the kibbutz, I'll conclude with a more schematic description. This will allow me not only to sketch a historical overview, but also to propose a theoretical model for dealing with similar phenomena.

Roughly speaking it is possible to delineate four major structures of reality: utopia relationships, each with its typical cultural functions and concomitant presentations. These structures are identifiable as historical phases which may overlap. The relevant parameters for determining each phase are:

1. the accord/discord between material and social reality on the one hand and the utopian model on the other, which I'll refer to from here on as representational accord/discord;
2. the cultural (symbolic) role of the kibbutz as perceived by its members and outside social and political forces, which may or may not accord with its positive or negative evaluation. I'll term this parameter symbolic accord/discord.⁸

Phase I. Representational discord and positive symbolic accord.

The basic contradiction between the reality of kibbutz life and its utopian conceptualization at the first phase stems from the clash between the extremely difficult conditions encountered by the members and the utopian promise of an (easy) struggle-free, happy life. This contradiction has been bridged by locating happiness in self-sacrifice and the total identification of an individual with communal and national goals. This was the most powerful ideological tool during a period in which survival depended for the most part on the acceptance of these values by the Jewish

population of *Eretz Israel* (Hebrew name for Palestine under the British mandate).

Cultural representations of this utopia of material and psychological hardships can be either totally oblivious of the difficulties—if all agree that the kibbutz is an actualized utopia it can certainly be represented through the utopian model and not mimetically—or they can incorporate the realistic anti-utopian elements inasmuch as the latter are contextualized properly. Narratively speaking: hardships must be welcomed, obstacles overcome, and optimism victorious. Strong, confident, articulate, indomitable pioneers must occupy center stage; the weak, irresolute or simple worker must be erased or marginalized.

Both options have been used extensively, more often by outsiders than by insiders. Yet many writers, particularly insiders, struggle against the second option. When they fail to comply with its dictates, their work is severely criticized both by kibbutz members and outside readers, for at this stage the self image of kibbutz members accords with that with which society at large views the kibbutz. Consequently, unrealistic stereotypical and idealized descriptions are accepted as adequate and true representations, while presentations focusing on the real problems of people who are used neither to the hard work nor to the hot climate, who occupy the social periphery and feel oppressed by the group, whose dreams reveal personal rather than national longings—are considered false, misleading and malevolent.⁹

II. Representational accord and positive symbolic accord.

For a relatively short period (in the 1950's), life on a mature kibbutz coincides quite well with the utopian model and kibbutz members are seen by themselves and by the surrounding world as the successful elite of a new liberal and socialist society. Modest economic success changes the landscape and the living conditions and yet the originary principles hold firm and the kibbutz seems to be able to stand fast against the wave of materialism and individualism which begins to engulf the outside world. At the same time many new Kibbutzim are founded, in particular in 1949–1950, following the war of independence, and they still embody the paradoxical utopia of hardships in the name of national goals.

The combination of the two types (young and struggling; mature and successful), coupled with the centrality of the kibbutz in the hegemonic ideology, supports a positive cultural consensus. The typical components of a second phase kibbutz cultural representations are a combination of the utopian model and the national roles (i.e. strong, good looking young people work the fields during the day and guard them at night; happy workers eat in the dining hall; beautiful blond suntanned children play freely on the lawns; a kibbutz member of *Knesset* (Israeli Parliament)—or even a minister—washes dishes in the communal kitchen all day on Saturday and briefs the members at night; the community as one entity shares its

members' joy and grief and responds to national calls for duty; etc.).

This representation is manifested in paintings, posters and postcards, exhibitions depicting daily life on the kibbutz as well as its achievements, and even on Israeli paper money [see appendixes].¹⁰ From now on the narrative option which developed during the first phase as a solution to the gap between the harsh reality and the utopian model (i.e. proper contextualization of anti-utopian elements) is called upon to fulfill the need for drama and conflict in certain literary genres. Novels and films focus on the national heroic contribution of the kibbutz as a whole, while conflicts between individuals are presented in relation to their tasks and are distanced from the essence of kibbutz life. In such texts the kibbutz is not the cause of individual unhappiness, and participation in national causes upheld by the kibbutz is the solution to such conflicts.¹¹

III. Representational and symbolic discord.

The basic contradiction between the reality of kibbutz life and its utopian conceptualization during the third phase stems from the gap between its material success and ideological failure.¹² With economic success on the rise the living conditions of all the kibbutzim change so that outwardly each kibbutz becomes a real utopia: in terms of the landscape—small houses with little gardens, comfortable apartments nicely furnished and well equipped, huge grass lawns, clean air, chirping birds, cultivated fields and groves as far as the eye can reach; socially—no economic pressures, no fear of the future, easy access to work (a few minutes walk) and a larger variety of jobs, more individual freedom and more opportunities for personal growth.

However, material success coincides with ideological failure. Economic success and its material manifestations become both the decisive factor in managing the kibbutz—bringing in industrialization, hired labor, and socially problematic professionalization (permanent distribution of work and social hierarchization)—and the measure of individual happiness—resulting in loud manifestations of inequality. The kibbutz self-image is now a divided one, embodying both a successful utopia and a social failure (most acutely manifested in a loss of attraction for both outsiders and kibbutz children, which is reflected in the diminishing number of members).

The symbolic status of the kibbutz is even more complicated. In terms of the ideological hegemony the kibbutz retains its symbolic value, but for all practical purposes it becomes one marginal sector competing with several others in a highly competitive market. Many sections of Israeli society feel the need to question or attack it, be they ex-members who need to justify their "desertion" (a term belonging to the anachronistic 'pioneer' discourse) or new-comers to the land who do not know the pioneering past for a fact and are conscious of the discrepancies in the cultural con-

cept (which still presents the kibbutz as a national and social avant-garde).

Artistic representations respond to the difficulty of representing a disintegrating cultural construct in multiple ways:

1. Backgrounding—an idyllic representation (outwardly quite similar to reality) of the kibbutz often serves more as a background than as the major object of description. As such it can serve as a foil to a story (usually a short one) of an atypical unhappy member.

2. Temporal removal—the kibbutz functions as a source of national strength (e.g. the hero, the positive protagonist of a novel or a movie, was born on a kibbutz) and provides an alternative to present society which is being criticized. Yet in both capacities it belongs either to the past or the future but is seldom located in the textual present.

3. Genre transposition—kibbutz representations appear in comic modes more often than in dramatic epics.

4. Reconciliation—the internal discord which characterizes the various axes is mimetically represented but a utopian-idyllic description is used as a harmonizing closure.¹³

IV. Representational and negative symbolic accord—the death of kibbutz-as-utopia.

During the last decade all discord seems to have been resolved by way of a negative accord. The kibbutz entered a phase marked by economic crisis and social despair during which it appears to have given up most, if not all, of its utopian aspirations. In its struggle for economic and demographic survival the kibbutz is rapidly losing its unique communal features and is in fact becoming a co-operative village. Simultaneously, due to internal, national and international developments, the kibbutz has lost its ideological function in Israeli society. The kibbutz-as-utopia exists no more.

Some of the representational consequences are readily detected. Undoubtedly the utopian model is no longer valid, but the kibbutz-as-failed-utopia still functions as a valid symbol of Israeli society. Through a comic presentation of the utopian model an author can criticize obsolete ideological norms. Through a more sympathetic presentation an author can mourn their disappearance and criticize the society which has lost them. Even without such contextualizations the representation can and will no doubt be used on the periphery of some cultural systems for a while (e.g. nostalgic stories for children).

The solutions developed during the third phase for the representation of the third cultural construct (e.g. backgrounding or temporal removal) are still useful, though the kibbutz as an origin no longer promises a protagonist success or a

positive role.

The major mode of representing the kibbutz is indirect or metonymic. The kibbutz typically enters a text through a former member, whose story is one of disintegration, loss of power, confusion or inability to acknowledge a real state of affairs. More often than not this situation ends in madness or death.¹⁴

D. CONCLUSION.

An actual utopia is a contradiction in terms. Though at times the kibbutz came very close to actualizing this paradoxical entity, it is no exception to the rule.

The cultural representation of the kibbutz-as-utopia came about when intellectual climate, hegemonic ideology and economic conditions which favored collectivism coincided. The repertoire of representational elements derived from three different sources: the literary model of utopia, various 19th century philosophies (most notably socialist but also mystical and anarchist), and the hegemonic Zionist discourse. Later on the sociological discourse gave the construct its current scientific (empirical) validity. Reality-based elements played a minor role in the crystalization of the dominant representation, though prototypical and specific phenomena (such as the communal dining-hall and the children houses) have provided some of the concept's prototypical attributes.

Israeli culture developed a number of mechanisms to deal with the unavoidable gap between the cultural construct and its referent. The most important one was the redefining of human happiness in terms of the possibilities raised by a utopia of hardships. Secondary mechanisms bridged the gap by providing functional principles for selection of elements from within the representation and by assigning to the representation different roles according to changing cultural needs. With the help of these mechanisms Utopia found a place in the real world, though its natural habitat is, and will always remain, the realm of imagined possible worlds.

I'd like to conclude by claiming that notwithstanding the unique features of the real kibbutzim and the specific history of the representations of the kibbutz-as-utopia, the model developed here for describing the relationship between mimesis and ideological representation has a general validity. The constitutive power of the cultural function, which determines any representation (i.e. any cultural construct) is a universal phenomenon. So are the mechanisms which a culture uses to enable its constructs to survive in the face of different experiences of reality.

Notes and References

1. The word kibbutz comes from the Hebrew word *Kvutzah* which means group.

2. The definitions in parentheses follow those found in: Joseph Blasi, 1980. *The Communal Future: The Kibbutz and the Utopian Dilemma* (Norwood, Pa.: Norwood Editions), p. 15. On this page Blasi summarizes Yonina Talmon's argument about and description of the process of change during the early stages of the development of the Kibbutz movement in Israel.
3. See note no. 2 for full bibliographical information on Blasi's book. All the titles mentioned in this section are included in his bibliography.
4. The (somewhat free) translation follows the version of "Be-Ein Harod Tov Meod" in Aharon Ze'ev *Pirhey Bar* [Wild Flowers], Tel Aviv: Am Oved Publishers, (no date), p. 58–59.
5. Cf Morus's: "This custom of shifting the farm workers is established in order that no one will have to do this hard work against his will for more than two years, but many of them ask to stay longer because they take a natural delight in farm life." (Quoted in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* [Revised] 1968, Vol. 1, p. 411). The idealization of farming is much stronger in the kibbutz (in actuality as well as in its ideological conceptualization), but the rationale for shifting is the same. It is interesting to note that Morus conceives of some jobs as totally unsuitable for citizens, and provides slaves or a few bondmen to perform these tasks. The kibbutz claims very strongly that all work is equal and equally respectable, but more and more manual work is performed by hired hands or by volunteers (i.e. people who wish to stay as working guests on a kibbutz for a limited time).
6. Yehuda Burla. 1954. *Snunit Rishona* [The First Swallow]. Tel Aviv: Massada. Due to its relative late appearance this novel was more harshly criticized for its naivety than earlier examples.
7. For example: Muneira, the heroine tries to define what she is looking for in life and says: "I mean something like the enterprise of the Jews in Palestine. Many young men and women come from all over the globe to Eretz Israel. They don't come for their own good, in the hope of some material gain, but for the good of all, to improve and develop the country so that it can sustain and nourish their people. They come as pioneers, fighting hard work, diseases, obstacles. They find meaning and joy in conquering themselves for the work..." (Burla, 111).

Her first friend explains to her why she should not worry about her fitting in: "the importance and advantage of the kibbutz is essentially the joining together of many individuals into a whole. They support each other, providing strength and a sense of security as long as all are united in purpose and beliefs. The central axis in the wheel of the kibbutz is work. It may seem that work on the kibbutz is like any other work, a simple familiar necessity. And yet work there has a new flavor, a new feeling, a new spirit. You work but know that you are not a slave to the work; you do not work for someone else; there is no employer around; everybody works..." (Ibid., 158)
8. Such parameters can theoretically yield eight structures. Two of these cannot exist: once there is a symbolic discord it cannot be marked as either negative or positive, because obviously both attitudes coincide. Two of the others: Representational accord and negative symbolic accord, and Representational accord coupled with symbolic discord appear only in the cultural periphery and cannot be illustrated in this short paper.
9. For a detailed discussion of such receptional histories, see: Shula Keshet, 1995. *UNDERGROUND SOUL. Ideological Literature: The Case of the Early Kibbutz Novel* (Tel Aviv: Ha-Kibbutz Ha-Meuchad and The Porter Institute of Poetics and Semiotics). In particular chapters 11, 12, and 13).
10. It is noteworthy that the exhibition and the circulation of this paper money happen in the 1960's when the kibbutz starts losing its cultural prestige on the one hand and enters a

period of crisis on the other. It seems that Israeli—or any?—society needs to maintain its symbols for some time after the reality underlying them changes, even before their cultural function changes in order to compensate for the discrepancy between reality and the cultural construct. See appendix 1 for the illustration.

11. As typical examples one could cite the movie “The Tear of Consolation,” and the novel *He Walked in the Fields*. More examples can be found in Eldad KEDEM, *Representation of the Kibbutz in Israeli features 1960–1968* [MA thesis], (Tel Aviv University, 1995).
12. There is a gross oversimplification in attributing all the changes to material success, and more particularly in presenting both success and changes as an inner process. So it should be noted that all the changes affecting society at large (e.g. growing materialism, economic growth, changing social needs with the absorption of many immigrants, transition from declared social ideology to democratic liberalism, the shifting of national responsibility from the individual to the state and its institutions, and so forth) are implied in my reference to material success.
13. The tension between the idealistic role and function of the kibbutz and its marginalized representation is analyzed in Kedem’s thesis (see note no. 11). He calls this ideologeme, this representational construct “to keep and to lose.” The principle of representation at this stage is, indeed, ‘to have your cake and eat it at the same time.’
14. An excellent analysis of cinematic examples is offered by Kedem in an MA examination which I was lucky enough to read. Kedem discusses Gabison’s *Shuru* (1990), Eran Riklis’s *Gemar Gavia* [Soccer Cup Final] (1991), and Assy Dayan’s *Life according to Agfa* (1992).

APPENDIX 1: ISRAELI PAPER MONEY (1958)



The woman belongs to an army unit which combines army service with preparation for life on the kibbutz, which is represented stereotypically: small houses with red roofs surrounded by fields. The far water tower is also typical.

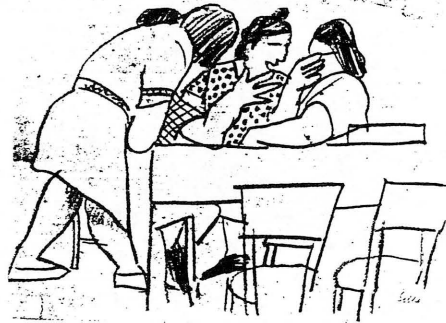


AN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL POSTER ACTUALIZING THE SAME MODEL.



APPENDIX 2: SATURDAY ON THE KIBBUTZ/Y. SIMON

APPENDIX 3: IN THE DINING-HALL IN AFIKIM/S. SEBA



This series is an interesting example of the basic paradox of the kibbutz-as-utopia: the mythical pioneer is represented as a human being; a meal is not a ritual; the dining-hall is not a symbol of communal togetherness, but a place where people eat, gossip, or dream their private dreams. The representation is quite atypical for its time (1945/6).

