

The kibbutzim As a Collective Political Identity Under Change

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In the 1980s the kibbutzim suffered a severe economic and demographic crisis, which endangered the continuation of their existence as cooperative communities. The inability of the kibbutz movements to identify the crisis or to resolve it through the existing social knowledge motivated them to adopt steps to increase efficiency, taken from the ideas of the free market and the capitalist method. Beyond the increase of economic efficiency, the arrangement of the community under new rules was accompanied by political influence, as can be seen in the change of the voting pattern of the kibbutzim members to the Knesset. This work focuses on the change of the political identity of the kibbutzim members in recent years.

The main argument is that the arrangement of kibbutz society under the new rules brought into the kibbutz a new social discourse that completely changed the way in which the individual defines himself in social and political terms. The old social representations of the cooperative kibbutz, which were the source of the unique identity, weakened and began to give way to a new set of values in which the individual is found at the center. The political byproduct was that the left parties that in the past served as a prototype for the socialist identity were perceived as not relevant to the new social identity, in favor of steadily increasing support for the center parties.

To track the change in the political identity, we chose to examine from up close three kibbutzim found at different stages of the change processes: Kibbutz Deganya A, Kibbutz Mizra, and Kibbutz Ein Dor. Every kibbutz member received a questionnaire, which asked about his understanding in a series of open questions. The objective was not only to identify which group in the kibbutz changed its political identity but primarily, to examine how the penetration of the new social knowledge contributed to this. The theoretical basis underpinning this research study is the Social Representations Theory (Moscovici, 1984), which emphasizes the constellation of social knowledge as the source of human behavior. The innovation of this research is in the ability to explain the social thinking behind the political identity and hence behind the voter's party preference.

The characterization of the findings indeed revealed a large gap in the perception of reality primarily between two age groups in the kibbutz. Unlike the older generation, the younger employed neo-liberal social representations to define itself, the community, and the political system. The left parties, like the old kibbutz, were perceived as old, inefficient, and thus not relevant for it in the voting for the Knesset.