

Brazilians and Argentineans in a Kibbutz: The Difference Persists

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THIS PAPER IS A BY PRODUCT of a doctoral dissertation, titled "The Moral Economy of a *Kibbutz* in a Time of Crisis," developed at the Department of Anthropology of The Catholic University of America, in Washington, D.C.¹ While doing fieldwork the researcher became aware of a subtle problem: that of the continuation—although in a very mild form—of the traditional rivalries between Brazilians and Argentineans.

The colonial history of the two countries has been one of rivalries between Portugal and Spain. In more recent times, after independence, they have struggled for the political hegemony of the South American continent. After World War I both countries started to industrialize, and have been competing economically as well. These conflicts have led to a growing consciousness of a "Brazilianess" and an "Argentineanness" as opposing identities. Because of the differences in the degree of acceptance of Jews in society at large, Brazil is much more well disposed towards Jews than Argentina. Even among Jews one can find this "competition".

This work analyzes the concept of *white ethnicity*² in a *kibbutz* formed by Brazilians and Argentineans. The study of this particular community is of special interest because its members both possess the ideologically globalizing ethnic and national identity of Judaism but at the same time are able to symbolically re-create the oppositions of their national origins—Brazil and Argentina—in the *kibbutz* setting.

The pre-migratory origins of the *kibbutz* members is, many times, used to mark a "boundary" between the two groups, creating a horizon

1. Sonia Bloomfield Ramagem, "The Moral Economy of a Kibbutz in a Time of Crisis," (Ph.D. dissertation, Department of Anthropology, Catholic University of America, 1993).

2. Roberto Cardoso de Oliveira, "Etnia e Estrutura de Classes: a Proposito da Identidade e Etnicidade no Mexico," *Anuário Antropológico* 79 (Rio de Janeiro: Edicoes Tempo Brasileiro, 1979).

of values and contrasts, which reflects the perception of both groups about the status of their respective countries on the international scene, filtered by time and space.

White ethnicity, such as other forms of ethnicity, creates a code which guides the participants of an inter-ethnic contact situation. This is the case of "immigrants from countries with dominant 'cultures/ i.e., hegemonic or quasi-hegemonic cultures. In the host societies, the holders of such dominant cultures have the same high status as their countries of origin have in the international scenery. . . ." ³. In this specific sense, the idea of nationalism becomes similar to ethnicity as "a set of ideas and value attributes" which separates symbolic territories many times opposed among themselves.

II.

In May 14, 1948, the independence of Israel was proclaimed. The country's basic tenet was to provide a homeland for the Jews scattered throughout the world: the *kibbutz galuyoth*. The new state declared that its members would be those individuals who held Jewish nationality—all Jews—to whom Israeli citizenship would be granted when doing *Allyah*.

The history of the *kibbutzim* predates that of the formal state of Israel. In 1909 the first *kibbutz* — Degania—was created and others followed. Their task was to cultivate the soil, expand land occupation, and provide for the defense of the Jewish population in the area, first under Turkish Ottoman control and, later, under the British Mandate. Those communities were the seeds of the State of Israel. After Israeli independence however, the *kibbutzim* lost much of their former roles. The consequent decline of their status and influence/power generated an enormous conflict—"the *kibbutz* crisis"—which resulted, on the internal level in almost all communities, in a dispute for power where groups search for kinship and "ethnic" ties in order to get support for their propositions regarding the future of the *kibbutz*.

In 1992, when this research was done, Israel had some 270 *kibbutzim*, and a total *kibbutznikim* population of 126,100. *Kibbutz Chevrah* (a fictitious name) was the first community created by South American Jews who, in the 1940's, implemented training farms in Argentina and in Brazil as a preparational stage to establishing a *kibbutz* of their own in Israel. The founding group decided to form a community composed mostly of Latin-Americans because, in the words of one of them, "a *kibbutz* with people with the same linguistic

background would be easier to manage." There was clearly a belief in a harmonious cultural Latin American unity, which later was proved mistaken.

In the beginning the group received restrictions from the Israeli government defending the idea that, for the purpose of national integration, the use of Hebrew was an absolute necessity. Hebrew would provide for the cultural homogenization of the new country and a *kibbutz* that used another language was a threat to the purposes of "nation-building". However the need for new immigrants was an even more important element and despite the initial opposition, on June 12, 1949, the group received authorization for the founding of *Chevrah*.

The founding members were 59 in total, all of them Latin Americans: 41 Argentineans, 10 Brazilians, 6 Uruguayans, and 2 Chileans. Of the founding fathers still in the *kibbutz* there are ten Argentineans and two Brazilians. In 1952 there was a crisis and 8 Brazilians (14% of the members) left *Chevrah* and went to an Egyptian *kibbutz* some 20 kilometers away. In the words of an Argentinean who was there at the time, "the Brazilians were very different from the Argentineans. They [the Brazilians] came here with university degrees and had many new ideas which could not be implemented. We [Argentineans] were mostly high-school graduates, clerks. . . . There was no way it could have worked out. It was a pity, they could have contributed a lot. . . ." We gain a valuable insight about class problems and the different cultural backgrounds from where the *kibbutz* members originated. It should be cautioned that this comment should be read carefully because the researcher herself is a Brazilian and the informant an Argentinean; most of the ethnic comments heard by the researcher were uttered by Brazilians.

The most common Argentinean version about the consequences of the crisis is that the Brazilians who left for the nearby *kibbutz* pushed the Egyptian founders of that community away because of their increasing demands. The two Brazilians who participated on this social drama, and choose to stay in *Chevrah*, explained their decision on the basis of a shared Jewish identity, which transcends the national origins of any individual.

In March 1992 *Chevrah* had 123 members who came from Argentina, 8 Brazilians, 7 Uruguayans, 31 Israelis, and 10 from other countries. Since its inception, throughout the years, *Chevrah* continued to receive new members, most of them Argentineans.

This Argentinean influx has not, however, deterred Brazilian immigration. In the words of a Brazilian who arrived during the 1960's: "I came here with the thought that we are Jews above all, and I have stayed until today". With these words the Brazilian tried to put aside

the Brazilian-Argentinean rivalry on behalf of a Jewish identity. Notwithstanding, this same person was the one who, in the words of another Brazilian: "fought like mad with the *kibbutz* administration when it decided not to accept the young Brazilians who came for *tapuz*. They [the Argentineans] always think that Brazilians don't like to work, wake up late, and refuse to clean the table when done; they also think that they [Brazilians] are spoiled brats because they are rich, study at universities and only want to graduate. She [the Brazilian] went to the *Assefah* and fought, a lot! She said that they [the Argentineans] had prejudice against Brazilians, that of course it was true they [the Brazilians] had a good economic standing, that they had maids at home, but she said she was personally taking responsibility for them [the Brazilians]."

Once again the issue of a supposed social and economic wealth of the Brazilian Jews—as well as of their way of mingling in Brazilian society—who can send their children to the universities and keep house maids, is a source of comments within the *kibbutz*. We can clearly perceive the different forms of insertion of Jews in the Brazilian and in the Argentinean societies.

Other ways in which this "ethnic duality" are expressed can be seen through soccer (or football)—a traditional element of competition between Brazil and Argentina—and food. As regards soccer, the researcher many times heard about the time when Argentina won the World Cup (1990) on a match against Brazil. As one person commented: "I was so upset. . . . Each time Argentina strokes a goal they [the Argentineans] made sure to commemorate [celebrate] in front of us. X [an Israeli, child of Brazilians] never came out of the house for two days because they [the Argentineans] were making jokes...."

In the case of food, it seems that it can present a form of symbolic resistance, an interesting parallel with what Scott terms "everyday forms of peasant resistance."⁴ A Brazilian lady told the researcher that anytime she was responsible for the meals she made sure to have avocado with milk and sugar, something which is abominable by Argentinean standards (and the whole non-Brazilian *kibbutz* population). Her words were: "They have to learn how to eat". On these days the Brazilians were happily fed with "real food": black beans, with "make believe" manioc flour, and bread crumbs.

An interesting aspect of this statement is that this Brazilian is married to an Argentinean—one of the two cases found in the *kibbutz*—and she did not seem to realize that there was an inherent contradiction of her words and deeds. The children of this marriage do not see

4. James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985).

themselves as either Brazilian or Argentineans but rather as Israelis. On the other hand, the children of Brazilian ancestry felt upset by the results of the World Soccer Cup (as mentioned earlier).

Despite its internal "duality," this *kibbutz* is known in Israel as the "Argentinean *Kibbutz*," even on an official level; when the brother of President Menem was in Israel he was invited to *Chevrah* for lunch, and he came with high ranking Israeli authorities.

This acknowledgment can also take negative meanings. In the words of a Sabra, who joined the *kibbutz* because of her marriage to an Argentinean member: "There is a big difference in our [Israeli] mentality and theirs [Latin Americans in general and Argentineans in particular]. When I bring Israeli friends here [in order to attract them to join the *kibbutz*, they [Latin Americans] keep speaking Spanish all the time, it is very difficult. The *Vatikim* work very hard, but the middle aged Argentineans and the young ones are different! They do the *siesta* [she spoke the word in Spanish, even though she doesn't know the language] and they will only work eight hours a day, not even a single minute more!"

The constant use of Spanish (or Portuguese) also brings other problems, be it through the expression of the "ethnic duality" in the speech of some Brazilians, or in the problems of inclusion of the members of the Latin American linguistic communities into the *kibbutz* and into Israeli society at large. These are interrelated problems.

In the first case, there is a "constant Brazilian complaint" that "Argentineans cannot understand what we say. Either they can't or they don't want to!" This utterance reminds us that: "... the most important thing about language is its capacity for generating imagined communities, building in effect *particular solidarities*."⁵

In the second case, there is the question of the Israeli nation, which emphasizes the use of Hebrew as a way of absorbing immigrants into society. Thus, the *kibbutz* general assembly meetings, as well as all of the documents that deal with the external world, should be written in Hebrew. However, because of the lack of its constant use, some people do not speak Hebrew well in *Chevrah*. In the words of an Argentinean who has been there for twenty years: "I confess to you, I don't speak Hebrew well! I have to read the newspaper for new immigrants . . . When I go to the general assembly [where all social and economic life of the *kibbutz* is decided through the votes of its members] people discuss in Hebrew and I am no match because I don't speak adequately and I am not fast". This way, through the exclusion on the part of the Hebrew

5. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1990), 122; Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.).

linguistic community immigrant who cannot speak well are kept away from its members, thus reinforcing the constant use of their mother tongue. It thus creates a process which is totally contrary to what was intended by the ideology of absorption of the Israeli State.

In general, following the results of the very few researches on Latin American Jews in Israel,⁶ the *LAIs* — Latin American Israelis—get selectively integrated to Israeli society through cultural forms, such as the way of dressing, dance, and food, but not through socialization. They tend to maintain friends from the same original geographical area, but have no religious participation nor political representation. According to Schers and Singer (1977)⁷ this is due to the nationalist and homogenizing character of their original societies in Latin America. In those countries the social world is based on networks of kinship and affinities, and foreigners in general, and Jews in particular (since they are based in Christian societies), are outside these closed systems where local power resides.

The most prominent authors who have written about Jews in Latin America (Elkin, 1980; Merx and Elkin, 1987)⁸ call attention to the discrepancy between the social and economic success of the Jews and their political and ideological marginality as a whole. However, the works affirm that the Jewish situation in Brazil is different from other Latin countries because Jews are accepted as a religious group, due to the country's religious syncretism, but not as an ethnic group with its cultural and national boundaries. While in Argentina, Jews are "foreigners" and as such develop a strong Zionist attachment; Brazilian Jews are perceived as "Brazilians of the Jewish faith," thus emphasizing mostly social and sports activities.

III.

As stated above *white ethnicity* derives from the status of the country of origin of the immigrant. There is a long history of rivalries between Brazil and Argentina for the hegemony of the continent. At

6. Luis Roniger, "The Latin American Community of Israel: Some Notes on Latin American Jews and Latin American Israelis," *Israeli Social Science Research* 6/1 (1988/89): 63-72.

7. D. Schers and H. Singer, "The Jewish Communities of Latin America. External and International Factors in their Development," *Jewish Social Studies* 39/3 (1977): 241-258.

8. Judith L. Elkin, "A Demographic Profile of Latin American Jewry," *American Jewry Archives* 34/2 (1982): 231-248; Gilbert W. Merx and Judith L. Elkin, "Jewish Studies as a Subject of Latin American Studies," and Sergio Delia' Pergola, "Demographic Trends of Latin American Jewry," both in *The Jewish Presence in Latin America* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1987).

present, the different stages of modernization of Brazil and Argentina provide their nationals with perceptions of their position in a hierarchy of modernity. Both countries are geographically contiguous, but Brazil is the 10th world economy, being Argentina ranked below that, which provides for a value opposition between the two countries. With this in mind, one can understand the context of the speech of the Argentinians regarding the economic status of the Brazilians, mostly when the speech is uttered by people who left Brazil and Argentina some twenty to thirty years ago, the period of the so called "Brazilian miracle".

This fact is reflected in the position taken by *Chevrah* members as Brazilians or Argentineans in this stage of a redefinition of the *kibbutz* in a time of a serious social and economic crisis, and which future shall be continuously chosen, in the sense that the decisions taken at the general assembly, through the votes of the members, will profoundly change everyone's life. Therefore, kinship and ethnic loyalties are important to gather support for positive or negative votes.

The assertion of Thompson (1966)⁹ that political and cultural factors have as much weight as economic ones in the formation of the concept of classes can here be employed—in parallel and selectively—in a context of national oppositions, because the capitalist system (defined through a class structure) is one of the creators of the modern nation states. Because it is a *sentimental link*, in the words of Anderson (1990)¹⁰ or an *experience*, as stated by Thompson (1966),¹¹ the way the Jew experiments an "Argentinity" is clearly different of the one experienced by a Brazilian Jew. Even if the Argentinean Jew feels an exclusion from the Argentinean nation, nonetheless he can manipulate his identity in situations of ambiguity, such as during in a conflict for power in which he perceives other groups in the *kibbutz* as opposed to his ideas of what is good for the future. On the other hand, the Brazilians, who are a demographic minority in the community, also manipulate Brazilian national symbols and the past economic prestige of the country to get more power.

These manifestations of *white ethnicity* contradict the ideology of equality and social solidarity of the *kibbutz*, which demands a cultural homogenization of its members. The same holds true for Israeli culture, with its emphasis on Judaism as nationalism, and the use of Hebrew in everyday language. It is a powerful centrifugal force in the social and cultural absorption of immigrants to the State of Israel, but at the same time, it may become a strong element of alienation.

9. E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Vintage Books, 1966).

10. Anderson, *op cit.*

11. Thompson, *op cit.*

Therefore, in contradicting the ideologies of the *kibbutz*, of the Israeli State, and of the Jewish nation, the opposition created by *white ethnicity* can only be presented in latent form, through ridicule, complaints and, mostly, through a perception of *cultural superiority* of one group above the other, such as among the Malayan peasants and their landlords, as described by Scott (1985).¹² *Chevrah* members still maintain, even in a distant cultural and geographical context, the national rivalries which have characterized the relations between Argentina and Brazil and, with and through them, the faithfulness to the language, the sports, and the food, which keep them somehow linked to the *immagined communities* of their countries of origin.

The understanding of *white ethnicity* is very important for a new State as is the case of Israel with its "*Kibbutz Galuyoth*". As time goes by there will certainly be an attenuation and even extinction, of these identities but, in the meantime, it is something Israel has to reckon with.

To conclude, it is important to keep in mind that this is not the only opposition in existence, nor even the most important, because there are others such as men and women, old and young, *sabras* and *olim*. This work has not taken these into consideration because its objective was only to present the study of two distinct national identities, originating from a common geographical context (Latin America), to present subsidies to the theory of white ethnicity, and to better understand the construction of a general Israeli identity.

12. Scott, *op cit*.