

Trouble on the Kibbutz

"Is the Kibbutz Kaput?" by Tom Bethell, in *Reason* (Oct. 1990), 2716 Ocean Park Blvd., Ste. 1062, Santa Monica, Calif. 90405.

To Israelis, the kibbutz is as vital a national symbol as the family farm is to Americans. Like the American family farm, the kibbutz is an ideal that has been sustained by a few; at no time has more than three percent of Israel's population lived on a kibbutz. Now, according to Bethell, a *Reason* contributing editor, kibbutzim share one other similarity with family farms: They are facing extinction.

More than 80 years ago, kibbutzim were created to establish a Jewish presence in Palestine and to fulfill the socialist dreams of transplanted European Jews. Their communal ideology—members receive food, clothing, shelter, medicine, and a small stipend for their work but are allowed no personal possessions—amounts to almost a second religion. Organized as agricultural collectives, many of the 277 kibbutzim in Israel today also manufacture goods; at Kibbutz Tsuba outside of Jerusalem, for instance, laminated auto windshields are made. But despite their reputation as successful economic ventures, most kibbutzim have survived into the 1990s only through a combination of government subsidy, Jewish philanthropy, and debt forgiveness from Israeli banks. Their insolvency was exposed only during the 1980s by Israel's massive inflation. Today, the kibbutzim's debt is a staggering \$4 billion, equivalent to 13 percent of Israel's gross national product.

The problems were there from the start. Beginning after World War II, the Israeli government, sensitive to the symbolic importance of the kibbutzim, began subsidizing them and protecting them from competition. But this policy only made them

dependent on government aid. Even during the supposedly golden years of 1954–57, Bethell says, most kibbutzim lost money, once the depreciation of assets is accounted for. The Jewish Agency actually had to "adopt" 100 newer kibbutzim during the late 1950s and early '60s to save them from bankruptcy.

Unfortunately, money is not the only problem down on the kibbutz. Because of what one leader terms a decline in "ideological strength" among the young, older kibbutzniks are witnessing an exodus of their children. At least half, by some estimates two thirds, now choose to leave when they come of age. (Collective child-rearing—once applauded by psychologists such as Bruno Bettelheim—was long ago eliminated at most kibbutzim.) Many youngsters are put off by the rigid property restrictions. According to Bethell, kibbutzim in recent years have "loosened their restrictions on private property," allowing members to own books, furnishings, and tools. But some leaders feel that too loose a standard will doom the kibbutzim.

What does the future hold? For now, the most pressing need is to pay off the debt. The government has organized a collective bailout, but the fear, says Bethell, is that "dead-weight kibbutzim will drag down those that are making a sincere effort." A more serious threat, however, may come from the young. Yochanan Blumenfeld, a second-generation kibbutz member, blames the financial troubles on a "crisis of motivation." Until kibbutzim solve the "problem of providing economic rewards," Blumenfeld predicts, "kibbutz members will vote with their feet."

Lethal Injection

"The Sick Man of Eurasia," in *The Economist* (Sept. 22, 1990), 10 Rockefeller Plaza, New York, N.Y. 10020.

During the 1980s, Western analysts hotly debated the quality of health care in the Soviet Union—and, implicitly, the Soviet quality of life. While *glasnost* still has not come to Soviet health statistics, it is increasingly clear that the country has seri-

ous problems.

Infant mortality, the *Economist* notes, often used as a gauge of general health care standards, is very high. While fewer than 10 American infants in 1,000 die in their first year—high, by Western stand-

Greek Nudes

Why did the ancient Greeks admire nudity? To them, writes Larissa Bonfante, a professor of classics at New York University, in *Archaeology* (Sept.-Oct. 1990), nudity was a form of *haute couture*.

Long before the Classical period of the fifth century B.C., Greek youths had been initiated into manhood in ceremonies during which they appeared naked. Athletes exercised and competed in Olympic games and other pan-Hellenic contests nude; warriors trained for battle without clothing, their trim, naked bodies an inspiration to fellow warriors and to poets who would extol their heroic deeds. By the fifth century, vases used at symposia—gatherings for male conversation, drinking, and amusement—were regularly decorated with figures of nude athletes; phallic sculptures guarded the crossroads; and statues of naked youths, life-size or larger, played an important role in the art of Athens and other Greek cities. To be nude was not only heroic and perhaps divine, it was also the true mark

of the aristocratic Greek male

Like clothing, nudity could be used to visually distinguish social groups—separating Greek from non-Greek, civilized from barbarian, men from women, and citizens from slaves

Certainly the Greeks were proud of their soldiers' physique and of their tan skin . . . The contrast between their own bronzed bodies and the white, effeminate flabbiness of the Persians inspired courage in the Greek troops

Ancient Greek authors recognized the singularity of the custom and tried to explain it. Thucydides believed that the introduction of athletic nudity into the everyday life of the gymnasia was part of the 'modern' way of life—freer, simpler, and more egalitarian.

The Greek habit of finding rational explanations for social customs persisted. Plutarch . . . saw a social purpose in the nakedness of men and women competing in the gymnopaidia at Sparta: to encourage young men to marry as soon as possible.

ards—the official Soviet number is 23. (It is an appalling 55 in the poorer Central Asian republics.) And Georgetown University's Murray Feshbach, a longtime skeptic of Soviet health data, thinks the real number is closer to 33. In some republics, 10 percent of all infants may be dying.

Why is infant mortality so high? One obvious reason is that among poor people everywhere it usually is. But Soviet children face an additional risk: an "injection epidemic." Soviet doctors, some of whom bribe their way into medical school and skip classes, treat even minor ailments with injections. Infants in the Central Asian republics receive 200–400 injections in their first year (American children typically receive five). A child with an uncomplicated upper respiratory illness can get 38 shots in one doctor's visit.

Painful, but not the end of the world—unless the needles are not sterile. All too often they are not. Disposable syringes are in extremely short supply, so needles are often re-used. And Soviet sanitary standards are poor. In Central Asia, 65 percent

of hospitals lack hot-water boilers and 17 percent have no running water at all. One result is that the AIDS virus, though less common in the Soviet Union than in other nations, is spreading rapidly. Today, children account for half of the country's 10,000–15,000 HIV infections.

Many parents, fearful that their children will be injected with an HIV-contaminated needle, compound the problem by refusing to allow them to be vaccinated against childhood diseases. In 1989 one-quarter of Soviet children were not vaccinated against polio; one-third missed vaccinations for whooping cough.

The Soviets are blunt about the danger: "Our maternity hospitals are simply made for AIDS to spread uncontrollably," is how one television commentator put it. Even so, a serious solution has yet to appear. To combat the problem, Moscow ordered that all children under 15 be vaccinated only with single-use syringes. Yearly demand for single-use syringes is at least 3.5 billion. In 1989, however, Soviet factories turned out 192 million.