

problems than diagnosing solutions. Katz tells of how he observed this after teaching his undergraduate course in “The Urban Crisis” at Penn. “All of [this history] is true and inescapable. But it leaves students depressed—indeed, it leaves me depressed as well.” He then asks, “Is this the vision with which my colleagues and I want really to leave our students and readers?” (Katz 2011: 155).

I think Katz was too hard on himself. Looking back through his urban scholarship, it becomes clear that he not only was a people person, but also one who was fundamentally hopeful. At the end of the day, he was an urban optimist. While often writing about very depressing subjects—poverty, inequality, racism, violence—he was careful to balance pragmatism with optimism, often doing this by bringing forth the voices and experiences of individual people whose lives defied typologies and pathologies. Beyond that, he was a sustained believer in the capacity of urban places to foster community and opportunity (even if that capacity was not often realized).

Particularly toward the end of his career, he sought out good-news stories (immigrant entrepreneurship, public-service employment as a path of African American opportunity) like a heat-seeking missile. While he was a sustained critic of public programs that had reified and reinforced social and racial inequalities, he informed this critique with an underlying conviction that truly equitable social provision remained in the realm of the politically possible. Although his scholarship originated in a New Left critique of Progressive historical narratives, Michael Katz was a “progressive” in the freshest sense of the word. He wrote about the past to urge all of us in the present to do better. Let us all try to live up to those expectations.

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Michael Katz's Contribution to Social and Social Welfare History

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Michael Katz began work on social welfare during the late 1970s with a project entitled “The Casualties of Industrialization.” That project led to a series of essays, *Poverty and Policy in American History* (Katz 1983), and a few years later to *In the Shadow of the Poorhouse* (Katz 1986). His reading in twentieth-century literature for *Shadow*—and the ideological and policy nostrums of the Reagan administration—

allowed Katz to pivot to two books that frame contemporary welfare debates in their historical context—*The Undeserving Poor* in 1989 and *The Price of Citizenship* in 2001, as well as a set of essays *Improving Poor People* (Katz 1995) that he published between the two.

One might look at Michael's welfare writings and draw a straight line between them and his earlier work on education. In both areas, Michael broke with the existing conventional wisdom, typically a narrow institutional focus often written by scholars who worked in education and social work schools. Instead, Michael began outside these institutions and viewed them critically. In the process, he laid out fields of study to which other scholars have contributed.

Despite the apparent connections between Katz's education and social welfare writing, the story is a bit more complicated. Michael came to his social welfare work after a decade of work in quantitative social and family history. Most of this time was devoted to the Hamilton project, an intensive examination of that Canadian city during the third quarter of the nineteenth century. That project produced two books, *The People of Hamilton, Canada West* (Katz 1975) and *The Social Organization of Early Industrial Capitalism* (Katz et al. 1982). In particular, during the Hamilton project, Michael shifted his attention from the gap between the claims of reformers and social reality to the complex set of decisions that ordinary people made about their personal life within the constraints imposed by existing social conditions.

In the last stages of the Hamilton project in the mid-1970s, Michael focused on three sets of family processes: structure, strategy, and economy. The basic analytical framework was that families used a variety of mechanisms (strategy) involving shifting household membership (structure) to achieve a balance of their consumption and resources (economy). In *The People of Hamilton*, Katz found evidence of significant changes in the life course of the city's residents at midcentury. Most importantly, he pointed to the importance of a stage of semiautonomy of youth during which young people in their late teens and early twenties frequently lived as boarders or relatives outside their parents' household. In *The Social Organization of Early Industrial Capitalism*, Katz and colleagues use ratios of work/consumption and wage/consumption as a way to characterize the family economy. The idea of a work/consumption index had its origins in the work of a Soviet agrarian economist, A.V. Chayanov, who developed it to make sense of the peasant economy (Chayanov 1966).

We expected to find that as families' consumption needs increased with the birth of children that they would use a variety of strategies to expand their resources. However, we discovered this didn't happen. For a number of reasons—limits on physical space, the rigidity of labor markets, the attenuation of kin relations—most families faced a predictable life-cycle squeeze in which poverty was more or less inevitable. How was it that a condition that a majority of North Americans faced—an extended period of life-cycle poverty—seemed to escape the understanding of the privileged few who wrote about poverty and ran charity organizations? It is this question that Michael takes up in the introduction to *Poverty and Policy* and ran through that book and *In the Shadow of the Poorhouse*.

A second aspect of Katz's social welfare work related to his intellectual style. Michael delighted in turning the conventional wisdom on its head. Irony, contradictions, and the gap between what people said and what they did were his stock in trade. In particular, he was suspicious of reformers. Well before conservatives used welfare "reform" and Social Security "reform" as cover for attacks on those programs, Katz suggested that the motives of social welfare reformers deserved the same level of scrutiny.

Before Katz published *In the Shadow of the Poorhouse*, the main actors of social welfare for progressive historians were the "reformers" who founded charity organizations and did most of the writing. Instead of nineteenth-century welfare being a story of white Protestants working their way toward Progressivism, Michael told a story in which public welfare officials, the Catholic Church, and machine politicians were central innovators, while the reformers were often using lofty rhetoric to hide a narrower set of motives. The most dramatic example of this was the story of the cutoff of outdoor relief in Brooklyn during the 1870s, a story first uncovered by Susan Davis, then a graduate student at Penn, and that Michael tells in both *Poverty and Policy* and *Shadow*. In Brooklyn, the reformers—represented most clearly by Seth Low, who would go on to be one of the first mayors of the consolidated City of New York—used claims about the corrupting influence of outdoor relief to cover up their efforts to break the power of the Democrats who used relief to secure the loyalty of their working-class constituents.

The tension between structure and agency runs through Katz's work. The Hamilton project for the most part tilted toward structure, and that tendency carried over to his early work on social welfare. Social welfare ideas and policy were often anchored in class structure, family structure, and the physical structure of cities. Ideas often surface as smoke screens that the respectable classes used to cover up their own interests or as blinkered ignorance of the poverty and desperation around them.

In his later work, the balance shifted from structure to agency and choice and led to a distinctive change in Katz's voice. In several tributes to Michael since his death, people pointed to Michael's moral compass as a trademark of his later scholarship. In place of the debunker's pleasure in skewering Charles Hoyt's deliberate manipulation of data in his 1870s survey of the residents of New York state's poorhouses (Katz 1983) or Buffalo, New York's Charity Organization Society founder Stephen Gurteen's maudlin stories of poor families' depravity (Katz 1986), we find an effort to craft a positive response to the war on dependence, devolution, and market models. This task took on a particular urgency because of the accusation leveled at Michael and other "revisionists" that their critique of state action had provided some legitimacy for conservative attacks on public education and the welfare state (e.g., Ravitch 1978).¹ *The Undeserving Poor* and *The Price of Citizenship* are remembered as much for

¹ Katz (2012: 157) returned to a similar theme, noting that accounts of the urban crisis by left-leaning scholars "unwittingly gave the right a gift—an interpretation that could be appropriated in the campaign to reduce the size and influence of government and privatize public functions."

Michael's unapologetic defense of our moral obligation to one another as for his reading of the contemporary literature.

So, in a way, Michael circled back to his work on education. In *Class, Bureaucracy, and Schools* (Katz 1971), Michael argues that there were a series of concrete alternatives to the emergence of bureaucratic public education systems, and the idea that we always have alternatives and that we always must choose runs through much of that writing.

In *Poverty and Policy*, Michael argues that the 1980s were a great deal like the 1870s. He writes (Katz 1983: 1):

Then, as now, respectable citizens worried about rising crime and radicalism and complained about high taxes spent on useless public programs. They thought that social programs wasted their money on the idle and immoral. . . . Economy, efficiency, and the superiority of the private sector became guidelines for public policy.

By the end of Michael's life, many of the ideas that had dominated public policy and to which he mounted a forceful critique were in retreat. Liberals and progressives no longer trim their sails against the headwind of market fundamentalism. Instead, the Democrats are debating what parts of democratic socialism should be included in the party's creed. I suspect we're entering a period in which ideas about reducing inequality and reanimating public institutions will play a larger role in the national conversation. It's a pity that Michael won't be here to enjoy and contribute to that conversation.

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