

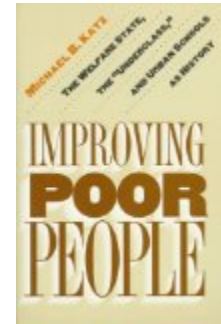
# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Michael B. Katz. *Improving Poor People: The Welfare State*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995. xi + 179 pp. \$24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-691-02994-8.

Michael B. Katz. *Improving Poor People: The Welfare State, the "Underclass," and Urban Schools as History*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995. xi + 179 pp.

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Michael Katz dedicates this set of essays summarizing his more than thirty years of work on the relationship of welfare policy, poverty, and schooling to his graduate students. Here is a historian at the top of his form writing about his career, his craft, and his concerns. Young postmodernists take note. The boundaries of personal and public history can be crossed, but it takes years of painstaking research aided by able graduate assistants to do so effectively.

Katz begins by telling us how he became a historian in the sixties. He studied history and literature under Perry Miller and Oscar Handlin as an undergraduate at Harvard, got an M.A.T. in history, worked as a playschool director at the Cambridge Neighborhood House, and completed his doctorate in history of education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Of these experiences, he says, working with poor children and their families affected him the most. From them Katz learned lessons that he (and I) did not learn at Harvard: about "what it took to survive poverty," and that stereotypes about poor people as passive, incompetent victims were patronizing and false (p. 146).

This personal story provides the context for the central questions of *Improving Poor People*. What is the relationship between urban scholarship and urban activism? Can history play a role in helping to alleviate the problems of American inner cities? Do historians advance social reform or retard it? Would historians contribute more to society if they worked directly on urban problems by becoming social workers, public interest lawyers, or got degrees in public policy (p. 3)?

Note what's missing from this list: becoming an urban schoolteacher. As someone who did become an urban schoolteacher after graduating from college, I share Katz's assessment of the transformative effects of working with poor children and their families. Though I may be biased on this account, Katz's omission of teaching is indicative of an ambivalence about education which appears here and elsewhere in his work.

Katz begins each chapter of *Improving Poor People* with an account of his personal involvement with the issue at hand. In 1992, he was appointed to Pennsylvania's Task Force on Reducing Welfare Dependency. He soon discovered that, for different reasons, everyone on the task force disliked welfare. Katz thinks historians can help by explaining why Americans have such antipathy to welfare and why welfare has been so impervious to real reform. He shows that American welfare policy has focused on reforming the morals and behavior of the "undeserving poor" rather than on providing much needed "outdoor relief." Tracing the development of poorhouses, "scientific" charity, welfare capitalism, and the limited public social security of what he calls our "semi-welfare state," Katz argues that the ideology and power of market models have prevented the growth of a concept of universal social insurance in the United States.

The chapter on the "underclass" begins with an account of Katz's role as historian for the Social Science Research Council's Committee for Research on the Underclass, initiated by the Rockefeller Foundation in 1987. He thinks historians can help by showing how the concept of the "underclass" captured "poverty discourse" by com-

paring conditions in inner cities today with what they used to be, and by hypothesizing about alternative approaches to welfare that don't pathologize individual behavior. Katz discusses how the "undeserving poor" became the "underclass," a term he says is unhelpful because it "muddies debate and inhibits formulation of constructive policy" (p. 97). He thinks the situation in deindustrialized inner cities is truly new and more desperate than in the past, when there were more opportunities for work. Though I am not an urban economist, I think some disaggregation would be useful here. Despite Mayor Rudy Giuliani's current "civilizing" efforts, there is more street-level entrepreneurialism going on in parts of New York City, for instance, than in Detroit. But Katz is surely right that we need successful "place-based" strategies that will reduce urban isolation and provide jobs. He argues convincingly that although these strategies should be local, support from the federal government is needed to fund them.

The chapter on urban schools focuses on the recent decentralization of public schools in Chicago. Katz describes how during his visit to Chicago for the first Social Science Research Council "underclass" conference, he learned from a television newscast about the election of local school councils made up of parents, teachers, and community members. Why had this momentous change received so little national attention, when Katz knew from his historical research how resistant school bureaucracies were to reform? So, funded by a grant from the Spencer Foundation, Katz and two colleagues from the University of Pennsylvania, social psychologist Michelle Fine and urban anthropologist Elaine Simon, began following what was happening in Chicago.

To place decentralization in Chicago in context, Katz reviews his work on the history of organizational models of schooling. Although incipient bureaucracy won out over paternalistic voluntarism, corporate voluntarism, and democratic localism, this was not the inevitable outcome. By the turn of the century, however, urban schools had become age-graded, hierarchically-structured, mostly free and compulsory educational systems, administered and taught in by trained specialists (p. 102). Katz further notes that "the cultivation and transmission of cognitive skills and intellectual abilities as ends in themselves" was not one of the original purposes of public education (p. 110). Here is more of the ambivalence I mentioned earlier. Although character education and other social goals were certainly high on the list of rationales for public education, there is less evidence for lack of focus on academics. My own re-

search and that of other scholars documents that many teachers, principals, and teacher educators were deeply interested in intellectual issues and strongly committed to the teaching of subject matter. In fact, Larry Cuban's *How Teachers Taught* (New York: Teacher's College Press, 1993) and David Tyack and Larry Cuban's *Tinkering Toward Utopia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995) suggest that teacher-centered, didactic academicism has been one of the most enduring characteristics of American public schools.

Katz thinks school decentralization in Chicago is a true, broad-based social reform movement. He argues that reformers in Chicago have access to money and to a school improvement plan based on "a solid body of empirical evidence" and "carefully articulated theory" that emphasizes "the relation between educational change and governance" (p. 117). Note again what's missing from this plan: the relationship of teachers and teaching methods to educational reform. Recent research points to the critical importance of how individual teachers implement pedagogical innovations. As Richard Elmore, Penelope Peterson, and Sarah McCarthey show in *Restructuring in the Classroom* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1996), the classroom is the level at which educational reform occurs or is subverted, in both centralized and decentralized schools. School administrators, especially principals, play a critical role, as do governance, school finance, teachers' unions, parents, and other societal factors. But like many academicians, Katz needs to pay more attention to the details of what's going on inside classrooms.

Katz puts re-energizing and reeducating teachers at the top of his list of the implications of history for improving urban schools. Here too, more attention to teachers would be helpful. If Katz had examined the social history of urban teachers, he might have phrased this suggestion differently. Like poor people, teachers are often stereotyped as passive, incompetent, and in need of improvement. While many teachers do need help, imposing reeducation without understanding how reforms affect teachers' already overburdened workdays is not a promising strategy, as Kate Rousmaniere's *City Teachers* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1997) suggests.

So how is school reform in Chicago progressing? Katz knows genuine reform takes a long time and that it is too soon to tell. He cites research indicating that school reform in Chicago is going well. Katz attributes this improvement to democratic localism. But here again he doesn't show the connection between changes in gov-

ernance and what goes on in individual classrooms and schools. Schools in Chicago have used their autonomy in different ways. We need to know more about the specifics and effects of these bottom-up reforms. And new, centralized curriculum standards have been instituted in Chicago since the experiment began, which may also be a factor.

The question of the success of the Chicago experiment is very important. Katz describes Chicago school reform as a “vast engine of adult education” in which parents and community members are learning through the exercise of democratic localism. But although parent and community involvement increased in Chicago initially, data in the April and May 1998 issues of *Catalyst* show a worrisome trend of declining participation in local school councils and elections, as Jeffrey Mirel notes in an upcoming book on urban education to be published by Brookings next year (personal correspondence, June 18, 1998).

As Katz knows, children must learn from this experiment too. Scores on standardized tests given to schoolchildren in Chicago have been going up. Katz understands that these are not the only measures of success and briefly mentions new research on alternative forms of educational assessment. He invokes the mantra of portfolios, a wonderfully individualized way of evaluating students’ work that is unfortunately also extremely time consuming for teachers and very vulnerable to subjectivity. So indicators are mixed but generally positive.

In a larger sense, Katz thinks the outcome of school reform in Chicago is critical to the future of public education in America. Can urban school reform stave off increasing demands for privatization? Can reformers “create a sphere for democracy that resists the market?” (p. 137). If the Chicago experiment fails, Katz says, advocates of school “choice” will inherit the field (p. 137). This may be pinning too much on one case and one city. There are school reform efforts going on throughout the country. Research on educational reform and school choice emphasizes that it is the specific details of these plans that matter most, as Bruce Fuller and Richard Elmore’s edited volume, *Who Chooses? Who Loses?* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1996) documents. The recent donation of \$100 million for a voucher program for poor children in the New York City Schools and approval of vouchers for religious schools by the Wisconsin Supreme Court is further evidence that privatization is a very real and

rapidly increasing possibility. Given all this, I’m worried about making Chicago school reform the “high stakes test” for the future of public schools in the United States as a whole.

In the conclusion of *Improving Poor People*, Katz asks how social institutions interact in shaping the lives of individuals and families and how poor people “navigate the terrain” of these institutions (p. 147). Drawing from qualitative case studies of Rose Warrington, Mary O’Brien, and Nellie Park, three poor women who lived in New York City around the turn of the century, Katz describes in moving detail the strategies individual poor people used to try to get support for themselves and their families. He traces routes into and out of dependence, such as illness and accidents, and remarriage and child labor. In these stories, mothers and sons seem to have bonded closely, but not all family members helped each other. Housing, of course, was a terrible problem. Housekeepers or concierges, positions that rarely exist today, were often very helpful. Political machines, on the other hand, did not come to the aid of these poor people, as some researchers have claimed.

Elegantly written and very usable, *Improving Poor People* illuminates the complexity of the history of welfare, poverty, and urban schools. Some institutions helped sometimes, but, looked at from a different perspective, “institutions reinforced existing social relations” (p. 165). In general, Katz says, schools were not among the institutions that helped. Education “as a source of mobility played almost no role in these stories about New York’s poorest families” (p. 163). This finding should come as no surprise to readers of Katz’s first book, *The Irony of Early School Reform* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968), in which he revised older scholarship on the positive effects of education. But why, then, does he place such high hopes on school reform in Chicago? The irony of Katz’s work is that it has contributed to the ideology of school failure which has fueled the movement for privatization he opposes. Undoubtedly his research has also been an impetus for school reform and improvement. These are the unresolvable tensions between scholarship and activism with which a historian must live, as Michael Katz knows well.

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