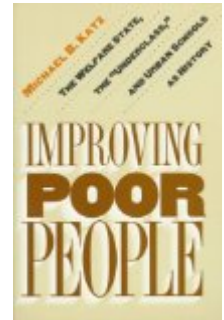


Michael B. Katz. *Improving Poor People: The Welfare State.* Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995. xi + 179 pp. \$24.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-691-02994-8.



Reviewed by Ed Berkowitz

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This book of essays takes the reader on an autobiographical tour of Michael Katz's career. Many participants in H-State will be familiar with the stops along the way, if not with the reasons that Katz made them.

The tour begins at Harvard and ends at Penn, a very modest decline in surroundings in these years of the great academic depression. In 1961 Katz, an undergraduate at Harvard, expected to study history at Berkeley, but the fellowship that Berkeley offered was not enough to support him and his family. Dan Fox, who would later become a distinguished historian of medical policy, told him about a master's degree in teaching available at Harvard's School of Education. Katz decided to pursue this degree, a decision that ultimately caused him to earn his doctorate at the School of Education, to specialize in the history of education, and to write the *Irony of Early School Reform*. There followed a period of intense engagement with social history that produced, among other important publications, *The People of Hamilton*. Then, in the mid-1970s, Katz set out to combine his interest in the history of institutions

with the quantitative study of populations. To do so, he looked inside of social welfare institutions by examining their demography. The result was *Poverty and Policy in American History*. Next came two important books in social welfare history: *In the Shadow of the Poor House* and *The Undeserving Poor*.

More recently, Katz has become interested in what other social scientists persist in calling the underclass, and he has also regained interest in urban education. It has been an inordinately productive and, by academic standards, greatly varied career.

The essays in *Improving Poor People* follow the logic of Katz's career, with an emphasis on social welfare policy rather than on social history. They begin with an extended examination of the welfare state, taken largely from *In the Shadow of the Poor House*, although modified by some of the newer state-centered (Skocpol) and feminist (Gordon, Muncy) writing. Katz repeats much of the present social welfare history orthodoxy, such as portraying social insurance as a patriarchal model of welfare that directed benefits to male family

heads, thus leaving problems distinctive to women uncovered. But wasn't widowhood in some sense a problem distinctive to women, and didn't the 1939 Social Security amendments do something about that? Did the distinction between social insurance and public assistance really block "the creation of a comprehensive program of economic security to protect all citizens"? If so, how? In the end, Katz notes that no single explanation accounts for the nature of the American welfare state, and he does an excellent job of demonstrating that distinctions between the public and private sectors, or between government and voluntary programs, are largely historical fictions.

The next chapter consists of a lengthy discussion of the underclass, taken largely from Katz's recent edited book on the subject, although with added autobiographical touches. Katz makes the point that the underclass is not a completely new phenomenon, that, for example, nineteenth century discussions of inner city residents sound remarkably contemporary. He discusses how economic, demographic, and spatial transformations have shaped the postindustrial city and produced modern dilemmas. Immigrants at the turn of the century lived in industrializing and growing cities; modern inner city residents inhabit deindustrialized and depopulated urban centers. He concludes with the notion that the "problems of the underclass represent in intensified form transformations that are reshaping the rest of America."

If the essay on the underclass has a tentative tone, the piece on urban schools--the most intriguing in the volume--displays Katz at his most spirited. In Chicago on an assignment in the upper echelons of applied social science research, Katz flips on the television and learns about that city's initiative to govern each school at the community level. Intrigued, Katz decides to investigate this radical reform. Using the same skills that he once employed selling encyclopedias, Katz snags a grant from the Spencer Foundation to study the

Chicago School Reform Act. Under this act, voters elect a local school council which has the power to hire and fire principals (who, in turn, can hire and fire teachers, although Katz never explains how union rules figure into personnel decisions).

The resulting exploration takes him back to his earlier studies of urban schools and causes him to confront the ambiguities of modern reform. The same measure that holds the promise of breaking down the stultifying bureaucracy that runs the Chicago schools also becomes the instrument that causes many middle class black teachers and administrators to lose their jobs. Although Katz recognizes that no clear policy implications emerge from the Chicago experience, he comes away from the study with a sense of optimism. The essay ends with a hopeful story of how a community group chooses a competent principal for a particular school and how this competent principal begins to make a real difference in the school she runs.

The last essay in the volume presents case studies from Charity Organization Society records of how various individuals in late nineteenth century New York coped with poverty. The cases resemble those presented in *Poverty and Policy in America* and offer intriguing glimpses into the family, religious, and other networks that poor New Yorkers constructed in order to survive economic misfortune. Katz notes that political machines provided less aid than historians have been led to believe. Instead, "families emerged from dependence because men found jobs, women remarried, governments granted pensions, or children went to work." In these case studies, one senses the possibility of a synthesis between social and policy history.

Considered together, the essays constitute a magnificent body of work, yet one detects a sense of discontent. Throughout his career Katz has flirted with the relationship between history and public policy. He not only wants to reconstruct old neighborhoods, he also wants to comment on

their relevance to modern stories of urban decay. He wishes to do more than illuminate the interiors of the poor house; he also hopes to show how the poor house continues to influence our modern efforts at welfare reform. At his most ambitious Katz wants to reform our welfare system, our schools, and our cities, and those are tasks that Katz recognizes as beyond the abilities of an historian.

As a privileged academic, Katz has sat in on some important discussions, such as the Pennsylvania Governor Robert Casey's 1992 Task Force on Reducing Welfare Dependency and the Social Science Research Council's committee on the urban underclass. But as a good historian he knows there are no easy answers to the problems posed in these forums and that there is a difference between scoring points in academic discussions and making a real contribution to social policy. "My conviction as a historian," he writes, "is that all grand theories simplify and distort by imposing a false consistency on the past." He describes the history of American social policy as "messy" and as "full of ironies and inconsistencies." Social policy needs to be grounded in an understanding of history; otherwise analysts will continue to ask the same old questions and fail to recognize the continuities and discontinuities in modern situations (such as the condition of the inner city). At the same time, Katz implies, historians are no better at offering concrete solutions to policy problems than anyone else. One comes away from Katz's essays with a similar ambivalence about the prospects for history and public policy that one gains from reading of David Rothman's and John Demos's experiences in similar situations.

Sometimes, too, Harvard-like words ("protean," "mimetic," "attenuation of urban social networks") crop up in the accounts of working class lives. Coming from a self-proclaimed democrat, these words are jarring. As Katz tells the story, working in a settlement house one summer, he came to appreciate the emotional resilience and

intellectual resourcefulness of the inner city children whom he encountered. His contact with these "gritty, smart survivors of urban poverty" made him an "unreconstructed democrat" ready "to challenge the image of the passive, incompetent poor."

As an unreconstructed democrat, Katz displays an intolerance for the anti-democratic and bureaucratic solutions to social problems that have characterized America since the progressive era. Hence, he favors schools governed at the community level and not by remote administrators who hide behind the trappings of professionalism. He does not approve of efforts to improve the poor but rather hopes that we can begin to improve poor conditions. In a typical passage, he writes that "there is no inherent reason why single mothers should be poor. Job opportunities, training, day care, health insurance, child support and, where necessary, wage supplements, I suspect, would erode the alleged culture of dependence more effectively than the coercive mechanisms embedded in the punitive welfare policies..."

Note the conflict here. He wants to reform the schools from the grass roots, but he wants the federal government (and presumably experts) to provide training and health care for urban residents. I think that Katz would himself recognize the conflict. He might argue that the inconsistency underscores his emphasis on the messy quality of American social policy. Indeed, his essays go far toward showing that one cannot be ideologically rigid about, say, privileging the private sector over the public sector or local above state government. From his wonderful case studies of people in the process of surviving poverty, one comes to realize that public and private, state and local forces have always combined in complex ways to aid and hinder the poor.

Katz is at his best in detailing the realities of being poor in late nineteenth and early twentieth century America. Like nearly everyone else, he

finds the prospect of ending late twentieth century poverty to be daunting. He knows that we cannot repeat the errors of the past but that we probably will. This is the dilemma that has defined Katz's career as he has travelled from Harvard to Penn. Unlike most of his fellow academics who have been lucky enough to make this trip, Katz has taken the time to stop in Boston and Philadelphia, look around, and not turn away.

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