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## Michael Katz and the Academic-Activist Tension

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All Dr. Katz's students admired how quickly he expressed a point, often through tidy lists. In honor of that style, I want to focus these remarks about Michael Katz and activism on four dimensions: (1) his understanding of the activist/academic tension; (2) how he advised his graduate students to wrestle with it; (3) how he engaged nonhistorians; and (4) how his work's prognosis of the prospects for social change transformed markedly in the last five years of his career.

Let me start with the first. I don't think there's any close colleague or student of Katz who didn't wrestle with one version of questions like these: "What am I doing in this archive, in this classroom, in this office writing all day when the world around me is blowing up?" Or, "What more can I be doing when I'm not?" Dr. Katz articulated the dilemma in his most personal book, *Improving Poor People*, where he asked, on its very first page: "Would historians committed to social reconstruction give more to the causes they champion with degrees in social work or public policy or as public interest lawyers?" (Katz 1995: 3). It was the problem, in other words, of trying to figure out the exact nature of that taut line between the activist and the academic roles.

I often discussed these existential questions with my fellow graduate students in Katz's orbit. In the wake of his death, several of us corresponded as a means of processing our emotions. One message that has stuck out came from Dan Amsterdam, urban historian and Katz advisee, who wrote only a few but powerful short lines. Dan's e-mail began with a quotation from Katz's first monograph: "This book tries at once to be a scholarly historical study and a piece of social criticism. . . . For the often partisan nature of my argument, I offer no apologies; the crisis in our cities must arouse a passionate response in all those who care about the quality of American life." Then back to Dan: "M.B.K. in March 1968, on the eve of his 29th birthday, on the first page of his first book. Love it." (D. Amsterdam, pers. comm., August 19, 2014).

The "passionate response" that the young Katz defended, of course, infused everything he wrote. Those writings showed me and so many of us that there were more ways of doing activism than the typical images that might first come to mind when we hear that word. All of Dr. Katz's books mapped onto the most pitched issues of the postwar period: urban education; the persistence of inequality and class structure; political avoidance of root causes of poverty; demeaning labeling by policy makers; and above all, the civic obligations of all of us to each other.

And his work traveled far beyond the academy and into the hands of policy makers but also activists. On this point, I remember a small and quiet moment—one that nonetheless looms large in my mind—when he told me that he was considering the major revision of his 1989 book *The Undeserving Poor*. He noted that it'd take a great deal of work, and he wasn't sure he wanted to revisit it. However, he mentioned one

big motive was that he'd get random letters about *Undeserving*, people he bumped into would tell him that they'd read it and how much it meant to them, and these people were not just historians, not just academics, but people who felt they needed some kind of scholarly compass to situate what was happening to the American welfare state in the Reagan era and beyond. That comment taught me that even if one spent most of his or her time producing scholarly work—and occasionally wondering what would happen to it—your work could and would often find its way outside into the right hands. Many activists, too, are searching for intellectual resources to help them find their way. His humble hope, Katz said in one of the last conversations I had with him, was that he and others could be there to provide those intellectual resources when they were needed.

Conversations like that bring me to number two: Katz as mentor on the question of activism. I don't think Katz liked abstractions about whether you *should* be an activist or you *should* be an academic or both. My feeling is he wanted his students to find their own role. There are academics interested in social justice who I think sometimes want to impose their models of engaged scholarship on students or even create clones of themselves. But cloning was not Katz's style. Catalyzing and nurturing self-discovery was.

On this—and speaking only for myself—the first four years of graduate school were years of often stunning political immaturity. I recall a period where I returned each semester with a new flavor of exotic European Marxism—and in one term—obscure strains of anarchism. Or another one—probably overlapping—where every paper I wrote sneered at the parochialism of American activism, dismissed urban grassroots activity as decentralized localism that added up to nothing, and scathingly ripped into American activists—and scholars—for the worst of ideological sins: insufficient anticapitalist analysis. I don't think Katz saw any reason to reign me in here, though, because he saw those years as a period of crucial growth underneath all the braggadocio. And it worked. After all that experimentation, in the end, I accepted that I was just a rather old-fashioned social democrat. I also developed an interest in engaging with real-world policy practitioners inside the system and activists outside of it, trying to understand the everyday pressures they faced, something that Katz did and modeled without peer. Of course, I'm sure Katz would not have minded at all where that political journey would have taken me—as long as I had thought it through for myself. He drew from several theoretical and political traditions.

That brings me to number three: Katz as conduit. Katz felt that if you were going to be useful to people other than academic historians—activists or otherwise—you had to reach out and initiate dialogue with them, not just talk in History Speak to fellow historians. That commitment began with his own books, loaded with cross-disciplinary citations to—and extended in-text engagements with—legal scholars, demographers, sociologists, political scientists, geographers, and others from so many fields. But beyond the scholarship, it extended to the University of Pennsylvania campus. Katz was always telling us students go see this person in the School of Design or that person in the School of Social Policy and Practice. But even more important were the folks outside campus altogether, many of whom would come to

the urban studies seminar many of us took. These included people from the mayor's office, Philadelphia nonprofit organizations, the city's immigrant welcoming center, and many others. I most admired Katz's willingness to invite to the seminar—and engage with—those with whom he did not share much ideological or political common ground. One visitor was a big-time foundation head who had spearheaded multi-million-dollar, market-driven community development initiatives of the sort Katz had written rather critically about. So, it was instructive to see Katz critically engage such a figure with civility while getting him to explain his positions.

Another example of such engagement took place when Katz served as the archivist for the Social Science Research Council's Committee on the Urban Underclass, founded in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and stacked with mainstream social science's leading lights on urban poverty. As Katz has written (1995), he entered with some dismay over how some of the committee's members framed the urban poverty question: beginning with the very notion of a distinct "underclass" that, intentionally or not, might become a stigmatizing label. But as I discovered looking at microfilmed archives of the committee at the University of Minnesota years later, Katz could make some inroads into the committee's thinking, writing memos of his thoughts occasionally, and undertaking a series of oral histories where he talked with members at length and asked them probing and often critical questions about their underlying assumptions.<sup>1</sup> He also produced one of the best things that came out of the committee: an anthology called *The "Underclass" Debate*, a collection of interventions by historians that took major policy issues—families, housing, urban poverty—and situated them in historical perspectives, pointing out the ahistorical blind spots of many policy makers (Katz 1993). But it was not just another exercise in historians' dumping cold water on nonhistorian social scientists. In the archives of the committee, I got a sense of how the book was assembled, and I was fascinated to learn that Katz made participants in that volume read large literature reviews and articles written by public-policy scholars. The message to me here was simple: to be credible as a critic, you had to know what you were talking about.

Let me conclude with number four: Katz on social transformation, which ties into Katz as omnivorous consumer of ideas and connector of people. Much like some of the other symposium participants, I noticed a transformation in his work in my final years of graduate school. It was around the same time I started asking him about the missing piece in his corpus: social movements, particularly of the confrontational grassroots variety. I get the sense he might have written much more on them had he lived longer, for I noticed a couple changes in a series of papers he wrote in the later years of his career, which self-critiqued—in often very explicit and bold ways—the institutionalist and structuralist thrust of his earlier work. There was the paper on the limits of the urban decline and crisis narrative in urban history, for instance. And the paper entitled "Was government the solution or the problem?," which examined the unintended consequences of the 1960s/1970s critique—including his own—of

<sup>1</sup> The material is housed at the Social Welfare History Archives at the University of Minnesota's Archives and Special Collections Department.

“government’s” serving as mere handmaiden to the powerful. Or take the essay, “From Underclass to Entrepreneur,” a meditation on the severe limits—but also the kernels of possibility—in market-driven solutions to poverty and empowering poor people, like microcredit. And finally, there was the overhauled “War on Poverty” chapter in the second edition of *The Undeserving Poor*, which incorporated new scholarship on Great Society-era activism that is transforming the common notion that the War on Poverty was nothing more than an ephemeral policy skirmish with little impact (Katz 2010a, 2010b, 2010c, 2013: 268–77).

But for me, the greatest statement came from a simple e-mail, one—like many—that I have thought about a great deal but have not been able to emotionally reread until recently. It came from an exchange about a draft of what would become “What Kind of a Problem is Poverty?,” the epilogue to the new *Undeserving Poor*.<sup>2</sup> That essay opens and closes with a sympathetic rendition of Progressive Era reformers, concluding with the simple words: “To make real progress, we need to recapture their energy and their faith.” In my comment on the draft, I wrote to Katz and asked: “I detected a stronger sympathy for figures in the Progressive tradition than in your previous works, and I wonder why . . . I wonder if you think I am reading you right, and if I am, what the reason for the tonal shift is.” Katz replied (M. B. Katz, pers. comm., August 13, 2012):

On progressivism: you are absolutely right. I’ve surprisingly found myself more sympathetic. Why? For two reasons: one is the appreciation of the role of government and the willingness to use it rather than apologize for it. The other is the energy and optimism. I’m so tired of academic cynicism. I have wrestled with the contradiction in my own work, or maybe lack of consistency is a more charitable characterization, from the anti-government stance of Irony to the pro-government position of the work on welfare.

I believe that consideration of better and more emancipatory alternatives—and the people who get us there, advocates and activists—might have become a new core focus were he still with us. And though I think Katz would have been the first to chuckle at the thought of his waving a placard or yelling into a bullhorn, given his remarkable ability to reflect and transform, perhaps this is not so crazy an image.

In closing, the big thread here is that Katz was more of an activist than he might’ve thought. Like all great multigenerational activists, he mentored those subsequent generations but without condescension, realizing they needed to grow, make mistakes, sometimes act foolish, and ultimately shape their own academic and activist self-understandings and roles. Like all the best activists, he existed in a wide network of people—some like-minded, some not so much. And finally, like the activists with the most staying power, he was intellectually adaptive, constantly rethinking, refining, critiquing, and even disposing his own assumptions. Reflexive, mentoring, connected,

<sup>2</sup> A longer version of the essay appears in Katz (2015).

dynamic—Michael Katz academic and Michael Katz activist were all these things, and I am so sorry we cannot see what else those qualities might've borne.

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