
MICHAEL B. KATZ



COURTESY OF THE UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA

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I MET MICHAEL KATZ when he and a group of students he had involved in the search for a new assistant director for Penn's Urban Studies program interviewed me for the position 28 years ago. It wasn't hard to get swept up in his passion for the undergraduate program and ensuring its excellence. I stayed for all these years because I felt honored to shepherd a program that Michael had revived with such wisdom that its coherent set of themes and dynamic pedagogy easily endured.

The Urban Studies office was in a small, three-story building near the corner of 34th and Walnut Street on the Penn campus. In this neglected turn of the twentieth-century building, my office on the second floor was always open because it lacked a door. With his appointment in the history department, Michael's office was in the even older and much grander College Hall, across the "green." But he popped into my office regularly with an idea or to talk about something he was working on.

Working with Michael was an ongoing affirmation and revelation. First, I'd never met such a renowned scholar who also was such a mensch. In fact, I don't think I even realized how important a scholar he already was when I first met him. With striking regularity, however, Michael would walk into my office to chat and hand me a copy of his latest book, saying he hoped I would like it.

Through our conversations and work together, I was surprised and elated that someone so important in the academic universe valued not only my work in urban studies but also my work experience with organizations in the city and my outlook as an anthropologist. I was overwhelmed by his generosity when he asked if I wanted to join him and another colleague, social psychologist Michelle Fine, now a CUNY professor, to study school change in Chicago in the first half of the 1990s. That adventure changed my life.

As a historian of education reform, Michael recognized the significance of what he saw on a television newscast he happened to catch on a trip to Chicago in the fall of 1989 showing hundreds of parents being sworn in as newly elected local school council members with the power to run their neighborhood schools. This citizen participation was the "democratic localism" he had identified in *Class, Bureaucracy, and Schools: The Illusion of Educational Change in America* (1971) as the path not taken in governing schools at the end of the nineteenth century. Describing the experience of seeing widespread citizen participation in public school governance, Michael said, "Hardly a detached observer, I wanted to know if the course of school reform would sustain my faith in the capacity of ordinary people to manage their schools and

in the liberating effects of shedding bureaucratic weight.”¹ Chicago’s experiment in democratic localism in the governance and improvement of schools came about because of the efforts of organized and energized local citizens in the aftermath of the election of Chicago’s first Black mayor. Michael was keen to see if it could revive and flourish at the end of the twentieth century.

Our trips to Chicago were rich experiences. We ricocheted from one extreme to another on any given day of field visits—from an all-Black school in one of Chicago’s low income South Side neighborhoods to a sumptuous office high in a skyscraper in the downtown “Loop;” from sitting in on a conversation about plans to slash public school funding among elites comfortable in the offices of a wealthy local foundation to observing a local school council meeting where a group of parents, newly energized by their legally granted power to hire the principal of their children’s school, interviewed candidates. These experiences introduced me to a dimension of education that I had never before considered (and, of course, one Michael well understood)—the role of the grassroots. Stitching together these two previously unconnected strands of my academic interests—neighborhoods and schools—has animated my ideas, research, and activism in education ever since.

For someone so accomplished a scholar as Michael, he was even more extraordinary because he truly and fully valued the work of urban practitioners and the direct engagement of activists and advocates in social justice efforts. His great strength was in scholarship, but he knew that it took more than scholarship to realize the kinds of changes in policy and ideas that he favored. His value of both scholarship and practice was certainly key to his dedication to undergraduate urban studies at the University of Pennsylvania. In assuming leadership of the floundering Urban Studies Program in the early 1980s and later establishing an Urban Studies Graduate Certificate Program, he created a unique space for students at the university. Urban studies students connect theory and practice as a basis for figuring out how to situate themselves in the world to make a positive difference. He took great pride not only in the accomplishments of his graduate students who would go on to important academic careers of their own but also in the accomplishments of undergraduate alumni who went on to found innovative schools, lead non-profit organizations, counsel mayors, and build affordable housing.

I learned so much about institutions from Michael through the advice and behind-the-scenes coaching he gave me regarding how to

1 Katz, M. B., *Improving Poor People: The Welfare State, The “Underclass,” and Urban Schools as History* (Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press, 2001), 100.

position the Urban Studies Program during difficult times and good ones. Among the many things I will miss about Michael is this guidance regarding the institution. His approach to institutions says much about his essence as a person. Let me explain via the observations of another colleague and friend of his. Michael had encouraged and helped conceptualize a conference at Penn that was called the “War on Poverty at 50: Its History and Legacy.” The conference, scheduled for early September 2014, less than a month after Michael passed away, became a tribute to him. At the conference, renowned historian of American social policy Alice O’Connor made an astute observation in her remarks. She noted the contrast between Michael’s passion, even anger, as a scholar and his gentleness and humility in person. This duality was also reflected in how Michael realized his goals within the institution of the university and his beliefs about institutions generally. Although he held strong opinions about the importance of urban scholarship, he was not an empire builder. He resisted trying to create an urban center at Penn but rather sought to articulate with and thereby enhance what already existed across the university.

In terms of the Urban Studies Program, Michael often counseled staying under the radar, while drawing on teaching and programmatic resources across the university. This advice ensured that urban studies could remain autonomous but would endure as a strong interdisciplinary program. In the same way, the Urban Studies Graduate Certificate Program complements and embellishes Penn’s doctoral students’ disciplinary pursuits within their own departments and schools. O’Connor’s observation perfectly captures Michael and how he saw the role of institutions. He was someone passionate about understanding and improving the lives of everyone in cities; however, he was clear that it was not his own glory that would make the difference but the reach of ideas and the range of strategies available to people to think about urban problems and conceive solutions. It wasn’t that he didn’t care about the response to his books and getting his ideas into circulation, but he was also interested in supporting platforms and strengthening structures that would contribute to learning and the exchange of ideas. Additionally, it was important for him to seed the institution with talented people. If he saw something in you, he would gently and without fanfare hand you the ball to run with and he absolutely delighted in seeing you make a mark. Each of his students and many others who worked with Michael over the years can tell a story with that theme. Those of us who were fortunate enough to know and work with him know how much we owe him for our accomplishments. Michael certainly made a fuss now and then, but his power lay in the rarity of his personal show of pique and in the essentially moral rather than personal motivation.

Michael's central legacy will, of course, be his scholarship and the ideas that he forwarded. I consider *The Price of Citizenship: Redefining the American Welfare State* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), while not one of Michael's most well-known books, one of his most important. I remember that Michael made a special effort to publicize the book, going beyond what the publisher itself was willing to do. He hoped the book's message would temper the way in which policy makers thought about social provision in the aftermath of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996. The act ended welfare as an entitlement, placing a lifetime limit on benefits and requiring recipients to work. In considering the shift that had occurred in welfare in the late twentieth century with Clinton's decision to "end welfare as we know it," Michael sought to broaden our conception of what constitutes social provision policy in the United States. In doing this, Michael laid out the underlying assumptions and motivations that shaped public policy in the era and pointed out that, fundamentally, any public policy reflects how we think of ourselves as a society. What he describes in this book is important today in understanding unexamined assumptions that continue to underlie current debates about the role of government. Ultimately, he characterized welfare policy (or substitute "education policy," "housing policy," or "healthcare") as reflecting a definition of "social citizenship" after T. C. Marshall.² For Michael, arguments over the role of government are not so much a debate about what the government is competent to do or what its appropriate reach is, but rather such arguments are a reflection of our image of ourselves as a society—essentially what we see as our obligations to each other and who we believe deserves our help. And, as Michael lays out in this book and elsewhere in his writings, these views are socially constructed, not natural or pre-ordained. In one passage, Michael takes the United States to task for the new welfare framework, and his anger is obvious:

"There is something bizarre about a rich society that assigns so many of its important tasks to a voluntarism that is defined as different from work and that carries no entitlement to the social benefits of citizenship."³

In all of Michael's work, policy reflects the choices we make as a society, the values that we hold, and the interpretations of character that we have. If we came to grips with considering what image we project to the world by our policies, I think Michael believed that we

2 Katz, M. B., *The Price of Citizenship: Redefining the American Welfare State* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 343.

3 Katz, *The Price of Citizenship*, 354.

would do the right thing. How policy and action reflect choices and interpretations that are not inevitable is a theme that runs through much of his writing. The theme of policy as socially constructed is reflected in his writing about defining the poor as deserving or undeserving. He takes up the theme in warning about the terrible implications of the term “underclass.” Finally, in his essay “The Death of Shorty,” Michael offered a complicated view of the life of a North Philadelphia murder trial defendant (Dissent Winter 2009). Michael worked on examining how certain views come to prevail, specifically the views that shape policy, including his own views, and exposed them as the result of choices that we make about social citizenship—about what we owe each other and how much responsibility we want to assume for each other’s well being. The clarity with which Michael explains this in *The Price of Citizenship* is remarkable, and after reading it, I felt that I had new insight that continues to shape how I view the endless arguing that dominates our politics whether today or in the past.

Michael was, however, an optimist. He struggled, despite teaching about poverty and inequality, to see and find solutions, bright spots in solving the problems he so clearly understood. He wanted to motivate his students to believe that they could solve them. He was no ideologue and could embrace a range of programs that others might reject on ideological grounds. He continued to struggle with those questions throughout his life, and that was what made him so exceptional as a scholar and as a person. In the final essay in the book *Why Don’t American Cities Burn* (2012), called “The Existential Problem of Urban Studies,” Michael grappled with the conundrum of wanting to be an optimist in the midst of the overwhelmingly negative picture that urban studies reveals—decline, inequality, and persistent poverty. He used as a Rorschach test his experience over 30 years teaching a course he developed when he first became director of the Urban Studies Program. The Transformation of American Cities (originally called The Urban Crisis) was often the gateway course for undergraduates interested in the field. Michael was concerned that committed students would become cynical and discouraged by the lessons of the urban crisis. He hoped they would follow their hearts and be motivated to take action and devise new ideas for cities. He was quite struck by a comment that Ananya Roy made about her teaching a course on global inequality at Berkeley, and he quotes her in the essay: “I teach in the impossible space between the hubris of benevolence and the paralysis of cynicism.” Michael adds that “locating and occupying this impossible space is the

existential dilemma of urban studies and of the American left as well.”⁴ It makes my 28 years with the Urban Studies Program at Penn worthwhile, and I have Michael to thank for that. Rereading some of his work for this memoir has made me realize yet again how influential he was in my life and my thinking. He has left a huge legacy in terms of his writing and ideas, his students and all of the colleagues he has worked with, and, most of all, his family. I am immensely grateful for the opportunity to have known him and worked with him, and I am so disbelieving that he won’t again stroll into my office to tell me about his next book project or how lovely a summer he had in Maine.

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⁴ Katz, M. B., *Why Don't American Cities Burn* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 161.