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History for Justice: Michael Katz and the History of Education

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I recently told one of my graduate students that I was contributing to the panel on which these papers are based, and he replied that reading Michael Katz’s *The Irony of Early School Reform: Educational Innovation in Mid-Nineteenth Century Massachusetts* (2001a) led him to apply to graduate school. My story is the same. When I was deciding whether to pursue a graduate degree, Katz’s *Class, Bureaucracy, and Schools* (1975) convinced me to study the history of education. What Katz’s scholarship, and later his mentorship, taught me was that one could be a historian with an eye toward justice, that one need not compartmentalize scholarly, political, and ethical commitments.

Katz developed countless insights relevant to historians of American education, but two stand out. Each illuminates the hallmark of his scholarship: the use of historical analysis to expose injustice and challenge inequality. The first theme involves the boldness and complexity Katz brought to the analysis of schools as class systems. The basic form of American public education, he argued, describing a structure that took shape by the late nineteenth century and persists today, was not only “universal, tax-supported, free, compulsory,” and “bureaucratically arranged” but also “class-biased, and racist” (Katz 1975: 106). Offered in the late 1960s and early 1970s, this insight challenged—and ultimately transformed—a field that still celebrated the egalitarian character of American schooling. Katz made questions about how educational reformers tried to use schools to control working-class people, how public schools reproduced social and economic inequality, and the antidemocratic implications of bureaucracy foundational to the history of American education. The second theme involves Katz’s efforts against intellectual silos. Long convinced that “significant problems do not respect disciplinary boundaries” (ibid.: xxiv), Katz produced scholarship that blurred intradisciplinary divisions between intellectual, political, and social history as well as those separating the history of education from histories of social welfare, employment, housing, and cities. This analytic breadth had important consequences for the history of education. Such a wide vantage point highlighted how educational thought rationalized inequality and raised important questions about the intersections between American public schooling and antipoverty policy.

It was no coincidence, Katz consistently argued, that American public schooling emerged hand in hand with an American working class. Both *Irony* and *Reconstructing American Education* (Katz 1987) carefully explored the social and economic context that gave rise to American public education as well as the intellectual frameworks that motivated reformers who led the common school charge. Nineteenth-century public school leaders, many of whom were inspired by early versions of cultural deprivation theory, responded to urbanization, industrialization, and immigration by trying to use public schools to control the behavior of and limit the social disruption caused by poor and working-class children. Throughout his career Katz addressed this issue without pulling any punches. Describing public schools as “imperial institutions designed to civilize the natives” (Katz 1975: xvi), he argued that mid-nineteenth-century urban school reformers aimed to teach a particular culture, morality, and behavior to the children of the poor, who otherwise, these reformers feared, would become criminals and paupers. In so doing, Katz inspired a generation of historians to investigate how educators sought to train exploited populations to accept their economic, political, and social plight. (Luckily, these historians also found much resistance among students and families.) The ways white supremacist educators, philanthropists, and politicians used schooling to stabilize racial and economic hierarchies represents a major theme in African American educational history, especially in James Anderson’s seminal work on “schooling for second-class citizenship” (1988: 1), as well as in histories of Native American education (Adams 1995), and the education of immigrants (Fass 1989; Tyack 1974).

Katz was also interested in what schools did to rich children, especially in how and why “the children of the affluent . . . take the best marks and the best jobs” (Katz 1975: xvi). *Irony*, which carefully analyzed the closing of a high school in Beverly, Massachusetts, centrally addressed how public schools reproduced social and economic inequality. Wealthier residents of the community, this case showed, supported the public high school because their children needed its credential to secure white-collar employment—and wanted public schools to provide this private good (Katz 2001a). Concern with the ways schools legitimized inequality also ran through Katz’s work, which emphasized that public schools were not the “great democratic engines for identifying talent and matching it with opportunity” that Americans liked to imagine (Katz 1975: xvi). Meritocratic rhetoric, he made clear, rationalized stratification by suggesting that the educational success of the wealthy resulted not from their greater economic resources or closer alignment between home and school cultures but from individual talent and effort. Elaborating on these concerns, historian and sociologist David Labaree (one of Katz’s students) exposed the centrality of consumerist impulses to twentieth-century American educational history and theorized the ways educational ideology helped Americans mediate commitments to political equality, on the one hand, and socioeconomic inequality, on the other (Labaree 1997).

In addition Katz’s work highlighted the ways class politics and bureaucratic institutional forms were linked. Both *Irony* and *Reconstructing American Education* exposed how incipient bureaucracy won out against alternative organizational structures—democratic localism, paternalistic voluntarism, and corporate voluntarism—to shape America’s urban public school systems from the mid-nineteenth century to the present. This structural form was politically consequential because bureaucracy’s essential feature was its undemocratic character: “the estrangement of institutions from their clients, of schools from communities” (Katz 2001a: xxvi). In fact, reformers who believed “that education was something the better part of the community did to the others to make them orderly, moral, and tractable” typically chose bureaucracy (Katz 1975: 48). Carl Kaestle (1983), David Tyack (1974), Ira Katzneson and Margaret Weir (1985), and others elaborated on Katz’s early work on bureaucracy, exploring the nature of opposition to common school reforms, the process of bureaucratization in American cities, and the challenges visions of schooling for all faced in nineteenth- and twentieth-century America. More recently, historians of community control efforts in the 1960s and 1970s also drew, sometimes explicitly and sometimes implicitly, on this analysis of bureaucracy (an interesting development because this was the political context that initially nurtured Katz’s interest in the topic) (Dougherty 2004; Perrillo 2012; Pritchett 2002).

Despite the thoroughness and complexity of Katz’s work on schooling, class, and bureaucracy, historians of education might return attention to these still pressing issues in the early twenty-first century. In 2001, Katz expressed surprise that class and bureaucracy did not play a greater role in recent histories of American education. Attending a state of the field conference in 2000, he found the three main foci of work were “classroom practice . . . identity . . . and the defense of public education against privatizers” but “missing were the issues that drove the revival of educational history in

the 1960s and 1970s: class and inequality and bureaucratic organization” (Katz 2001a: xxxiii). These oversights were unexpected given rising inequality since the 1980s and widespread experimentation with the institutional structure of public schooling (including charters, choice, vouchers, and privatization) since the 1990s. In fact, while “the issue of bureaucracy—its meaning and alternatives—has never been more alive in American education since the middle decades of the 19th-century,” Katz found historians of education “strangely silent on the question.” This silence, he suspected, derived from a desire to defend public schools against attacks from advocates of privatization, an insight that raised important questions about the complexities of writing history with an eye to justice (*ibid.*: xxxiii–xxxiv).

Katz’s work on the class dynamics of schooling, which always recognized the inseparability of class, race, and ethnicity in American history, especially deserves renewed attention and elaboration as we enter the twenty-first century. The decades since *Irony* was first published saw not only rising inequality but also persistent housing and school segregation in the nation’s metropolitan areas; the resegregation of many southern school districts; new waves of immigration making the needs of language minority students inseparable from the politics of educational inequality; the ascent of color-blind racial conservatism that rationalized retreats from civil rights gains; and rightward movements in national politics generating “the war on dependence, the devolution of public authority, and the application of market models to public policy” (Bonilla-Silva 2010; Katz 2001b: 1; Katz and Stern 2006; Orfield 1996; Sugrue 2008). Many of the questions Katz addressed when viewing the nineteenth and early twentieth century remain pressing as one looks at the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries: how have public schools aided (and impeded the progress of) recent immigrants; which socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic groups have supported and opposed major educational innovations and why; and how effective have public schools been as egalitarian levers in the nation’s evolving knowledge economy. Historians might also turn renewed attention to the role of higher education in the reproduction of socioeconomic inequality. The children of the affluent, Katz found, have typically acquired increasingly more rarified credentials (high school diplomas in the common school era, college degrees in the age of the high school, and graduate degrees more recently) when everyone else started catching up (Katz 1975: 110; Labaree 1997: 28). This pattern is important for thinking about recent stratification in American postsecondary institutions, which, as political scientist Suzanne Mettler argues, “increasingly resembles a caste system” that “takes Americans who grew up in different social strata and widens the divisions between them” (Mettler 2014: 4). The evolving importance of early childhood education represents yet another area where historians might situate contemporary discussions of education and inequality. Achievement gap studies by sociologist Sean Reardon reveal that as wealthy parents invest heavily in early childhood education, the dice is being loaded against low-income children well before kindergarten (Reardon 2013).

Katz’s work raises another set of questions—about the political functions of educational thought—that I hope historians of American education, politics, and social thought will consider. One of the most important issues in the history of American

education, Katz argued, was “how education has been used in America as a way out of public dilemmas—as a painless substitution for the redistribution of wealth—and how and why that gambit always fails” (Katz 2001a: xxix). A number of historians have recently investigated “educationalization,” that is why and how Americans turn to schools to address large-scale social problems educational institutions cannot possibly solve alone (Cohen 2005; Gordon 2015; Kantor and Lowe 2006; Labaree 2008; Steffes 2012). Scholars approach the issue from different angles. Some see educational reform rationalizing a stunted welfare state while others suggest education has been the nation’s most important social welfare commitment. This work is deeply indebted, however, to Katz’s ongoing concern with the sources and consequences of fighting poverty and inequality with education. Educational responses to poverty were a problem, Katz argued, because they have not worked. “In fact,” he maintained, “insofar as it [education] has been a smoke screen, obscuring the nature of social problems, educational reform has hindered broader social reform” (Katz 1975: 109). Historians can build on this insight by analyzing how the educational “smoke screen” has functioned, investigating its enduring power, and exploring how and why it has evolved over time.

A final way that historians can continue to engage the issues that animated Katz’s work is by reviving his interest in the public character of public schooling. Given the many private interests that built our educational systems Katz asked, with worry, in 1971 “can a structure be made to serve very different goals from those that it was constructed successfully to reach?” (ibid: 149). While cautioning historians to acknowledge strengths and weaknesses in public education, he also, in 2001 (2001a: xxxiv–xxxv), expressed hope:

There remains, however, a core, a set of ideals at the center of public education, more important and more threatened than at any time in the last 150 years. The erosion of the public sphere and the exuberant application of market models everywhere in social policy make urgent the task of reformulating the idea of public education and reconstituting its structure.

Public education, he implied, was one of the few places where commitment to the public good could flourish in our new, early-twenty-first-century Gilded Age. And historians—Michael Katz consistently taught—have a crucial role to play in reinvigorating the public sphere and in convincing Americans of the importance of our obligations to one another.

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Michael Katz, Urban Optimist

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“It is hard to capture the sense in which life in the past, especially in cities, differed from living today,” Michael B. Katz wrote in the conclusion of his first book-length work of urban history, *The People of Hamilton, Canada West* (Katz 1975: 311). “For