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Michael Katz, Urban Optimist

Margaret O’Mara

“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

the recognizable components of past urban life lull one into imagining a continuity greater than that which exists. In fundamental ways the patterns and texture of urban existence have changed.”

Over more than four decades, Katz produced a remarkable corpus of urban scholarship that demonstrated in precise terms how and why these changes occurred, all the while remaining keyed into and responsive to contemporary debates. From the era of the Kerner Commission to the age of Mike Bloomberg, Katz provided incisive, provocative insight into how a very different urban past nonetheless shaped the urban present.

In doing so, he was not simply interested in how institutions structure economic mobility and social organization, but in capturing the joys and sorrows of everyday experience. All his works of urban history were social histories at their core, intensely interested in, as he put it, “the invisible men and women” whose voices were absent from the written historical record (*ibid.*: 16). They also had a sustained focus on what he characterized in *The People of Hamilton* as “the two great themes of nineteenth-century urban history . . . transiency and inequality” (17). As his focus shifted from commercial cities to industrial and then postindustrial ones, Katz continued to fix his eye on how these two dynamics affected everyday life and opportunity.

The People of Hamilton marks the beginning of Katz’s urban scholarship. *Why Don’t American Cities Burn?* (2011) is its capstone. Examining the two side by side reveals these constants, as well as other through-lines of sources, methods, and politics. But such an examination also reminds those of us who attempt to sum up Michael B. Katz’s brilliant career should not be lulled into imagined continuities. Here was a scholar who was always pushing out into new territory and new subjects, with a capacious appetite for discovering the work of other disciplines and incorporating fresh perspectives on old problems. In his constant searching for new and fuller answers, he revealed a remarkable intellectual humility about learning from others, as well as an essential hopefulness about where people, and communities, might go next.

Written at a moment of intense interest in the dynamics of North American social mobility and of the digitization of the “ur-source” of the manuscript census (Katz 2015: 561), *The People of Hamilton* examines the human and material landscape of what one observer “patronizingly called . . . the ‘ambitious little city’” as it climbed toward commercial prosperity at the middle of the nineteenth century and then plunged into an urban crisis soon afterward (1). Here, Katz pays meticulous attention to the phenomena and people left out, and disrupts smooth narratives in which country became city, farmers became factory laborers, and workers swapped blue collars for white ones.

He tells of families like the Mottasheds, Cawlys, and Sheas, whose ever-shifting household structure moved from nuclear to extended and back again. He tells of men like Wilson Benson, the restlessly transient Irish emigrant whose restless transience was not remarkable, but typical, of the people of the day. As a gentle, Katzian thumb in the eye of other cliometricians’ “attempt to plot rational patterns” in people’s lives and establish a “taxonomy” of social organization, he weaves census data with sources like Benson’s memoir to show how random, accidental events shaped

nineteenth-century lives prior to a more predictable bureaucratic era of late industrial capitalism (105, 214).

The People of Hamilton also shares a distinctive methodological hallmark of much of Katz's work in being the product of a larger scholarly collaboration (one that also went on to produce *The Social Organization of Early Industrial Capitalism* [Katz et al. 1982]). As Katz observed, "historians traditionally are a lonely lot" (Katz 1975: 12), and he joined his New Left compatriots in seeking a more collaborative model of scholarly production. He proceeded to maintain this collaborative spirit even as our profession retreated back into its burrow of the single-authored monograph, continuing throughout his career as an urbanist to collaborate, co-author, and unhesitatingly give others credit when and where it was due.

Thirty-six years after *The People of Hamilton*, these characteristics resurface in *Why Don't American Cities Burn?* Here again, Katz is interested in central questions about transiency (reframed here partly as a matter of economic insecurity as well as of immigration and emigration) and inequality, but his canvas is the postindustrial metropolis rather than the commercial and early industrial city. Here again, he draws upon (and generously credits) the work of others and the work he has performed collaboratively with current and former students and colleagues. But he also now is seeking less to be a rabble-rouser at the gates of behavioral science, and more to deliver stories of resilience and hope amid the so-called urban crisis.

The human story that opens and threads through the book is one of his most vividly realized and poignant portraits, that of Herbert Manes, a man whose life was filled with as many random twists and instabilities as that of Wilson Benson's a century and a half before. Unlike many of his previous "invisible men and women," Manes was someone that Katz met in person, after serving on the jury at Manes's murder trial. (It should be little surprise that this astoundingly productive scholar turned the dead space of jury duty into an opportunity for productive intellectual inquiry.)

Why Don't American Cities Burn? examines the same interplay between urban culture and structure in a postindustrial setting—one punctuated by remarkable new waves of immigration as well as precipitous deindustrialization and privatization. The denizens of a place like late-twentieth-century Philadelphia are like those in 1850s Hamilton. They are restless and on the move, experiencing massive economic change that advantages some and marginalizes others, and are constrained by boundaries of race and ethnicity. But it is playing out in a very different setting—not just an urban form, but "forms"—taking so many different shapes that the city becomes less recognizable. It also is a landscape shaped by institutional action (or pullback); if Hamilton is prebureaucratic, postindustrial America is postbureaucratic. Partially because of that, poverty becomes personalized once more—from welfare queens to underclasses to immigrant entrepreneurs, economic mobility is framed by society as something under an individual's control.

Herbert Manes's story draws us into the beginning of the book, and Katz's discussion of "the existential problem of urban studies" pulls us in even tighter toward the end. Here Katz provides an extended, rather rueful, meditation on a field that he had done so much to shape but that had been more effective at explicating

problems than diagnosing solutions. Katz tells of how he observed this after teaching his undergraduate course in “The Urban Crisis” at Penn. “All of [this history] is true and inescapable. But it leaves students depressed—indeed, it leaves me depressed as well.” He then asks, “Is this the vision with which my colleagues and I want really to leave our students and readers?” (Katz 2011: 155).

I think Katz was too hard on himself. Looking back through his urban scholarship, it becomes clear that he not only was a people person, but also one who was fundamentally hopeful. At the end of the day, he was an urban optimist. While often writing about very depressing subjects—poverty, inequality, racism, violence—he was careful to balance pragmatism with optimism, often doing this by bringing forth the voices and experiences of individual people whose lives defied typologies and pathologies. Beyond that, he was a sustained believer in the capacity of urban places to foster community and opportunity (even if that capacity was not often realized).

Particularly toward the end of his career, he sought out good-news stories (immigrant entrepreneurship, public-service employment as a path of African American opportunity) like a heat-seeking missile. While he was a sustained critic of public programs that had reified and reinforced social and racial inequalities, he informed this critique with an underlying conviction that truly equitable social provision remained in the realm of the politically possible. Although his scholarship originated in a New Left critique of Progressive historical narratives, Michael Katz was a “progressive” in the freshest sense of the word. He wrote about the past to urge all of us in the present to do better. Let us all try to live up to those expectations.

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Michael Katz's Contribution to Social and Social Welfare History

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Michael Katz began work on social welfare during the late 1970s with a project entitled “The Casualties of Industrialization.” That project led to a series of essays, *Poverty and Policy in American History* (Katz 1983), and a few years later to *In the Shadow of the Poorhouse* (Katz 1986). His reading in twentieth-century literature for *Shadow*—and the ideological and policy nostrums of the Reagan administration—