

SOMETHING IS OUT OF PLACE: THE HISTORY OF WELFARE REFORM

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Michael B. Katz. *In the Shadow of the Poorhouse: A Social History of Welfare in America*. (New York: Basic Books, 1986). xiv + 338 pp. Notes, index. \$22.95.

Historical research and analysis of the American welfare system are at least as old as one of the welfare workers' main professional journals, *The Social Service Review*, which from its earliest issue has published historical articles. Their goal often seems to have been to give the professionals a reassuring sense of the past in order to bolster their sense of value and permanence. In the past three decades professional historians have also been engaged in researching and writing the history of the welfare system: for instance, issue number 62 of the *Social Welfare History Group Newsletter* appeared in November 1986 with a bibliography of several hundred entries. In spite of this substantial body of literature, the detailed and empirically accurate history of welfare, especially as written by ambitious social workers-scholars in the 1930s, has often been just about as dull as one imagines it to be.

This historiography changed with the politicization of welfare issues in the 1960s. The federal "War on Poverty" turned national attention to welfare issues; simultaneously, social control theorists showed that welfare was not quite the pure, naive benevolence it may have seemed (Gettleman, 1963; Banner, 1972). Their claims that social welfare was an evil, subtle means of social control masking the intentions of the state to shape the nature of society's least powerful, sent a thrill of revisionism through the history and policy writings on welfare. Piven and Cloward (1974) became well-known through academia for their strong assertions that rather than doing good, the welfare system was doing bad. By the late 1970s, writing on welfare had been pretty much divided between the social control camps and the constant progress camps, although to be sure many historians, Grob (1983), for instance, captured the saner center ground but with little of the fanfare that had accompanied the work of Piven and Cloward.

A certain irony may be observed in the politics of the two camps. Social control theorists branded those who saw welfare history as a sequence of progressive reforms as conservative functionalists. Social control theorists were, for the most part, self-

identified with the political left. Yet the seemingly conservative functionalists were in favor of promoting the welfare system and also of getting more of it, while the leftist social control perspective of Piven and Cloward contained a strong dose of antistatism and antigovernmentism. Thus in the 1980s the left and the far right have come full circle in opposing state intervention in the lives of the poor, the dependent, and the mentally ill.

Michael Katz's exciting early work (Katz, 1968) on educational history positioned him with the left's social control perspective, but by the mid-seventies he (Katz, 1975) had moved on to establish himself as a leading practitioner of the "new social history." His two books on Hamilton, Ontario (Katz, 1976; Katz *et al.*, 1982), remain models of this school of history, for they detail with prodigious care and methodological sophistication the social and political lives of mid-nineteenth century Ontarians.

What a surprise then to find Katz, with *In the Shadow of the Poorhouse*, turning his research and writing skills to social welfare, a topic that has lost its glitter and lacked a new synthesis or even a driving set of arguments and with which he has dealt only marginally in previous work. Yet now in two major books (see also Katz, 1983), he has taken on and mastered a new field. The most recent of these two books, under review here, is a survey history of social welfare in America, beginning with the colonial period. It is encyclopedic, acute, up-to-date, engaging, critical, occasionally irritating, and deliberately polemical, and exhibits just the correct balance of historiographic sensitivity and substantive description.

The book's polemical goal is in fact quite modest—to demonstrate that welfare in the United States has always been a mix of public and private, with the public, or state, share predominating. This, Katz proclaims, is to be the future of welfare. Thus his aim is to persuade readers not to junk the welfare state, such as it is, in favor of a privatized system. Now to anyone familiar with our welfare history, Katz's polemic is quite mild, but some on the political right and left are apparently so antistate in their thinking that they propose to abandon our evolving but ancient system. As Katz seems compelled to assert his own leftist political credentials randomly throughout the book, I wonder if his polemic is directed toward the antistate left. If he was also thinking of the right, presumably his book is intended to counter the work of authors like Murray (1984); if so, it is bound to fail, because Murray attacks only specific programs in the welfare system and not the question of whether we should have a state-supported system. Moreover, to the extent that Murray's book persuaded some sort of conservative constituency, Katz's book will only confirm their deep suspicions about the liberals' mushy-headed support of welfare. So I suggest that this book be read for its substance and its insightful historical

sketches, and that its polemic be set aside as essentially irrelevant, for this is a fine piece of historical scholarship.

In particular, Katz is to be commended for sugar-coating his pill of generalizations and abstractions with brilliant little biographical vignettes of often forgotten welfare activists. He does so in an analytically attractive way by giving biographical details to show an individual's thoughts and actions without succumbing to the "great person" mode of analysis. For instance, he contrasts Josephine Shaw Lowell with S. Humphreys Gurteen. She comes off quite well in the contrast, for her harsh conservatism and elite background is nuanced with an acute sensitivity to genuine needs, to the contradictions and inadequacies of the late-nineteenth-century welfare system, and to her abiding and deep values. On the other hand, Gurteen, a reformer, minister, and novelist, comes off as a superficial and disengaged dabbler in social policy. Katz's sketches of Lowell and Gurteen make vivid and comprehensible the genuine difficulties of designing welfare that both offers immediate aid and achieves socially desirable consequences.

Katz is best when writing on the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He skillfully ties together the complex story of indoor (poorhouses) and outdoor (cash or in-kind assistance) relief together by using much primary data to illustrate the actual results of the ill-fated attempts to eliminate outdoor relief. He also makes a conscious if not entirely successful effort to relate the welfare systems to the changing nature of the American state. While such relationships seem like an obvious area of discussion, prior to this book little was written in this direction.

I wish Katz had pushed even further in this area. The dispute over indoor and outdoor relief revolved around the apparent negative consequences of the latter, a discourse in which Lowell weighed heavily. She and others claimed that outdoor aid did not reform the poor and that their bad characteristics that had made them poor in the first place could not be corrected without a character and practical training regime in a total institution. Similar arguments are made today over Aid to Families with Dependent Children: The structure of the payments, it is often alleged, encourages women to have families without either husbands or the possibility of nonwelfare incomes.

Katz does not note the ironic contrast between the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries: The age that discovered "hereditary pauperism" (p. 107) proposed to break up families and to exert strong environmental controls, while our age of environmental determinism makes every effort to keep families together and to preserve the welfare recipient's social networks. Common causal thinking and policy clearly have little relationship. Whatever the illogic of the reasoning, indoor relief, or institutionalization, offered the possibility of controlled environments and educative character reform. So the use of outdoor relief dwindled at the end

of the nineteenth century. Katz documents this with great care, a far more difficult chore than the average reader may appreciate. However, he overlooks the issue of the state, for indoor relief translated into a locally dispersed, continuous building of county poorhouses and farms based on a massive infrastructural investment by county governments that has not yet decayed. Today, many county nursing homes sit on land or even still use the solid brick buildings of the last century's poorhouses.

Katz documents richly and uses quotations judiciously for the era down to the Depression, which he characterizes as the era of the "semi-welfare state" (p. 113). However, the same praise must be withheld from the final third and briefest section of the book, one that skips the early post-World War II era to jump into the War on Poverty. Here Katz is more journalistic and descriptive and less subtle. This reflects in part the historiography, which is also journalistic and no more analytically subtle than the original policies themselves. How can we expect anyone to comprehend more recent events that have, as Katz (p. 261) points out, witnessed welfare expanding "most dramatically" during the (rhetorically) antiwelfare presidency of Richard Nixon? Katz entitles his chapter on the most recent past "The War on Welfare," and claims that the Reagan presidency has turned to wiping out the massive federal welfare system. While this may indeed be its intention, it seems to me that the expansion of welfare in the Nixon years suggests that campaign rhetoric and policy action lead in such different ways that it is too early to assess the Reagan era.

The larger question is, what has happened to the mix of local and nonlocal welfare? Katz does an admirable job of bringing up this issue, but we do not have yet an adequate conceptualization of how the whole thing works. Wallis (1985) has pointed out, for instance, that the stupendous growth of federal government as measured by expenditures may make the nature of state power seem more centralized than it really is. Many federal government funds are simply transferred back to states and counties, and programs ranging from food stamps to farm assistance retain a localism reminiscent of the late nineteenth century. It seems as if any attempt to examine postwar history is dragged into a "presidential synthesis," as Cochran (1948) labeled it, that exerts an invisible analytic scheme. Thus there is an essential structural problem in our thinking about the welfare system that derives from the nature of the system itself.

Because the American state is built on a federal system, with local government doing the bulk of the actual work, there is almost always local irregularity or unevenness from county to county. All users of government services who have mobility (the one thing the local state does not have), including access and the capability of analysis of information, may in essence shop for the best government services and costs packages. Whether the users

are businesses concerned about tax structures and amenities or welfare recipients, local governments must compete with each other. Such competition tends to produce a constant pressure to drive down taxes and increase benefits. But any kind of equilibrium is difficult to achieve given the different scheduling of the complex of services and costs associated with local government. For instance, the industries that have highly educated employees generate local demands for quality schooling, policing, and welfare. The latter slowly attracts poor migrants, who in turn increase demands on welfare and then on taxes. Welfare expenditures can respond quickly to demands, but schools and libraries cannot. Local governments can watch the quality of their educational services erode as welfare costs rise; rational response may be impossible, due not only to lack of funds but also to the inherently different time frames. Thus the nature of the American state has an enormously complex set of pressures and responsibilities that no analyst can handle with facility. Nor, for that matter, can any policy maker.

Only the moral values can be clear. The richest nation on earth spends enough to give its poor a real income far better than most of the world's people can imagine, while at the same time the streets are filled with socially inadequate human wrecks and babbling maniacs. There is no better place to start in figuring out the dynamics and essentially historical origins of this urgent social disaster than with Michael Katz's *In the Shadow of the Poorhouse*.

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