

Michael B. Katz, 1939–2014: A Tribute

Alison Prentice

In the magical late 1960s, an amazing young scholar came, armed with a Harvard doctorate, to his first tenure-stream job at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE), then in its second year as a new independent research and teaching centre affiliated with the University of Toronto. Our paths crossed; fortuitously, it was the summer of 1967, which coincided with the beginning of my Ph.D in U of T's History department. In one of those accidents that determine one's fate, my advisor Maurice Careless suggested that, since the focus of my research was to be the history of education, I should wander up to "that new place on Bloor Street" (OISE) to see about a course on the subject. There, the chair of the History & Philosophy of Education Department (H & P) steered me to Michael's new offering on the history of American education. Participation in this brilliant seminar was life changing. Embedded in intellectual, religious, cultural and social frameworks, and interpreting educational history to be more than the history of schools, his course led students to more questions than answers. I found both the course meetings and the readings riveting.

Michael's own encounter with graduate education and, in 1962, a summer job described as "working with poor children and their parents in a settlement house"—an experience that he found life altering—are described in an illuminating essay about his career that he published in 2011.¹ Although strongly attracted to work in social justice activism, in the end he chose the academic path that led him to OISE, itself a vibrant experiment in graduate education. Summarizing his time there, Michael called attention to three areas that were important to him. At OISE, he "could write and teach the history of education, help pioneer the study of modern social history in English-speaking Canada, and contribute to the building of an interdisciplinary social science setting for the study of education."² His first three books appeared while Michael was in Toronto, at OISE and later on as a member of the History department at York University: his revised doctoral dissertation, *The Irony of Early School Reform*; a collection of essays entitled *Class, Bureaucracy, and Schools*; and finally *The People of Hamilton, Canada West*—the latter possibly the first substantial Canadian foray into what was then called quantitative history, in this case urban history that was grounded in raw data from nineteenth-century census returns. Michael and his

colleague, Ian Winchester, had initiated the Canadian Social History Project which attracted graduate student collaborators to explore the “intricate relations among occupation, wealth, gender, age, ethnicity, property ownership, social mobility, family organization, and the life course during the emergence of industrial capitalism.”³ Also influential was the important anthology he edited with Paul Mattingly, *Education and Social Change: Themes from Ontario's Past*.⁴

As Michael himself relates, his work (perhaps especially the quantitative work) was not fully accepted and remained controversial. But his impact, both then and later, on Canadian educational and social historians was substantial. While I didn't know them all, the many master's and doctoral students who worked with Michael at OISE and York were usually proud to be known as members of the “Katz mafia” and were profoundly inspired and influenced by both his teaching and writing. While doctoral students like Ian Davey, Harvey Graff, and Mark Stern eventually brought the impact of their studies with Michael at OISE and York to their future work in social, educational or literacy studies in Australia and the United States, others, including Michael Doucet, Susan Houston, Paul Axelrod and myself undertook teaching and writing in the educational history of Canada. This is not to mention the many Master's students who went on to careers in teaching and/or historical writing. Others, like Chad Gaffield, turned up at the Institute after Michael left, but were nevertheless influenced by his work.

I can only speak to my own experience, but perhaps a snapshot of my days in the early History and Philosophy Department at OISE illustrates something of the times, as well as the radicalism of the place and some of its people. In its first location, a superb collection of primary materials in American educational history was housed in a locked cage in the basement of the Institute and interested graduate students were given a key. Work there on my essays for Michael was only slightly disturbed by the graduate students who used the space surrounding the cage to play some sort of basket or volley ball, which often involved crashing the ball against its metal walls. A similar atmosphere prevailed in the second, purpose-built edifice that soon housed the Institute further west on Bloor Street, at least in H & P, where the seminar tables were often jammed together so people could play ping-pong. Massive piles of cards for his quantitative work initially took up a lot of Michael's office space, only to be replaced by even more massive piles of computer printout that spread beyond it. OISE politics were unusual too; by the time I joined the department as a faculty member in 1975, H & P ran on one person one vote, for certain crucial decisions, be it a faculty member, student, or member of the support staff. Yet academic standards were high in the course that I took with Michael, who also encouraged extracurricular scholarly exchange, creating a group that, for a time met at his place and included historians from outside the Institute.

My growing interest in the gendered character of higher education led to an initial foray into its history that was published in the first issue of this journal. I called it “Scholarly Passion: Two Persons Who Caught It,” stealing both the phrase “scholarly passion” and the idea that it was transmitted from one person to another, from one of its subjects, the University of Toronto's Mossie May Waddington Kirkwood.⁵ The

phrase captivated me, I am sure, because it captured my own experience of marvelous mentors, of which one of the most influential was Michael Katz. His Canadian students and friends, and others who studied with him or knew him in Canada, will join me in lamenting that his death in August of 2014 cut short what continued to be a wonderfully productive and inspirational career in educational history in its broadest sense, the sense in which a society and everyone in it is both an educator and a student. Michael Katz was a superb example of both and called attention to both throughout his working life.⁶

Michael loved people and opened his last book, *Why American Cities Don't Burn*,⁷ with the tale of two impoverished Black citizens of Philadelphia, whose conflict ended in the death of one them and the subsequent trial of the other for murder. The fight was over a ten-dollar debt. Michael rendered the fates of these men unforgettable, as he did the fates of other individuals whose stories he told over the years, giving life to the larger histories they inhabited. His many readers, as well as his former students, colleagues and friends, will surely join his family in mourning the passing of a truly extraordinary historian and social critic.

Notes

- 1 Michael B. Katz, "An Accidental Historian: Serendipity in the Making of a Career," in Wayne J. Urban, ed., *Leaders in the Historical Study of American Education* (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2011), 179-191.
- 2 *Ibid.*, 185.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 185.
- 4 (New York: New York University Press, 1975).
- 5 *Historical Studies in Education/Revue d'histoire de l'éducation* I, no. 1 (Spring 1989): 7-27.
- 6 In 1978, Michael moved from York to the University of Pennsylvania and embarked on many new directions and projects. His view of his subsequent career in the United States may be found in "An Accidental Historian," op cit., while the views of others may be found in Paul Vitello, "Michael Katz, Who Challenged the View of Poverty, Dies at 75" *New York Times*, Sept. 4, 2014. See also, Chad Gaffield. "Michael B. Katz, 1939–2014," *Bulletin*, Canadian Historical Association/Société historique du Canada 41, no. 1 (2015): 34-35.
- 7 (Philadelphia: Penn Press, 2011).