

Letters to the Editor

To the Editor:

Jeffrey E. Mirel's discussion of my book (HEQ, Fall, 1987), *IN THE SHADOW OF THE POORHOUSE: A SOCIAL HISTORY OF WELFARE IN AMERICA*, so violates the minimal obligation of a reviewer that I feel compelled to respond. That obligation is to describe the book and present the author's argument as accurately as possible. Put negatively, it is to avoid misrepresentation. I found it almost impossible to recognize my book in Mirel's review. Here are a few reasons why.

Mirel argues that *IN THE SHADOW OF THE POORHOUSE* applies a model developed in my earliest work to the history of social welfare. He says that I see "American institution building as a process of unremitting class domination rather than a process of political conflict and compromise that results in less than perfect institutions." There are three things to say about his contention. First, I believe that my understanding and interpretation of American social institutions has developed and changed in each of the works published since *IRONY* appeared in 1968. Second, the argument in *SHADOW* is demonstrably different than in that in any of my other books. Third, as any reader of the introduction to *SHADOW* will discover, the book argues that throughout most American history social welfare has served four purposes: the alleviation of distress; the regulation of the labor market; the regulation of behavior; and political mobilization. To this, the Civil Rights Movement added a fifth purpose: the alleviation of the consequences of racism. The book illustrates the interplay of these purposes since early in the 19th century.

Mirel argues that I present the development of mothers' pensions "as simply one piece of the child-saving movement whose real motive was 'to develop an apparatus for supervising families.'" My discussion of child-saving, in chapter 6, in fact, argues that reformers engaged in a debate about three major questions: the role of institutions; the balance between public and private action; and the importance of preserving families. I showed how mothers' pensions grew out of the consensus that gradually emerged around these issues.

Mirel states that "he routinely falls back on a mechanical model in which the contradictions of capitalism act like an invisible hand to undo any reform effort." He provides no documentation of this claim, because none exists. Indeed, *SHADOW* does stress the contradictions of capitalism, but it also stresses human agency, political choice, and debates among alternatives.

I could go on. Mirel doesn't like the title; he objects to my allotment of approximately 1/3 of a book on 200 years of American history to the

period since 1930. If he understood the book, he might grasp the reasons for the choices I made. If other reviewers made the same mistakes, I would worry that the book lacked clarity. Fortunately, that is not the case. Mirel is entitled to his evaluation of the book; he is not entitled to misrepresent it.

Michael B. Katz
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To the Editor:

Michael Katz's accusation that I have not fulfilled "the minimal obligation of a reviewer" is a serious one. Katz is particularly disturbed by my characterization of his work (including his earlier studies on education) as arguing that institutions such as schools and welfare have been part of a process of unremitting class domination. The five point summary of the book that he repeats in the letter makes *In the Shadow of the Poorhouse* appear to be a thoroughly balanced treatment of social welfare in which class domination is but one theme among many. Claiming to analyze the "interplay" of the purposes of welfare also suggests an even-handed treatment of the subject; yet "interplay" is one of those slippery words that begs for a concrete demonstration of the relationships.

Let's look more closely at the point by point summary that Katz refers to in the introduction of the book. The part Katz cites is only half the story. The rest of the paragraph in which that summary appears focuses entirely on the ways in which welfare has been used to "promote social order by appeasing protest or disciplining the poor." He continues, a paragraph later, stating that the purposes of welfare that he has identified "are inconsistent with each other, and the unresolved tensions between them have undercut virtually all attempts to formulate coherent welfare policy." He concludes the paragraph noting, "Indeed, of all their contradictions, the most glaring and debilitating has been the incompatibility of policies that simultaneously preach compassion and stress deterrence. It should be no surprise that deterrence has usually won" (xi).

To be sure we don't miss the point, Katz states midway into his first chapter, "Indeed it is only a slight exaggeration to say that the core of most welfare reform in America since the early nineteenth century had been a war on the able-bodied poor; an attempt to define, locate, and purge them from the roles of relief" (p. 18). The purpose of that war, Katz argues, has been to force poor people to labor at appalling jobs for miserable wages. That he finds occasional instances where the poor have won battles in this conflict (I assume this is what he means when he says this study differs from his earlier work on education), does not diminish

the fact that his book recounts how the poor have lost the war. In this book, the “interplay” of purposes always went in one direction: to underscore the theme of unremitting class domination. That theme runs through every chapter, and it is hardly misrepresentation to assert that this is the main point Katz is trying to make.

Katz also attacks my argument that in his interpretation the contradictions of capitalism act like an invisible hand to undo reform efforts. It is hard to avoid that assessment given Katz’s regular interjection of statements such as the one about compassion and deterrence that I noted above. Such statements notwithstanding, however, he claims that in addition to the contradictions of capitalism he “stresses human agency, political choice, and debates among alternatives.” This is the “interplay” argument again. If the contradictions of capitalism usually win out over these other factors isn’t it fair to say that these contradictions are the moving force behind what occurred? One example here should suffice.

Katz begins his discussion of New Deal work relief programs stating, “This failure of work relief did not result from a lack of will or intelligence on the part of administrators or from the indolence of their clients. Rather it reflected the contradictions between work relief and American political economy” (p. 224). After discussing such New Deal programs as the Civilian Conservation Corps, the National Youth Administration, and the Work Projects Administration, some of the most imaginative and hopeful governmental programs ever established, Katz concludes:

In retrospect, whether the New Deal relief programs succeeded or failed, whether the administration had options that were both better and equally realistic, are less compelling issues than the irreconcilable tensions that ran through the first great American experiment with federal work relief. For these showed the incompatibility of massive public work relief with America’s capitalist economy and federalist political structure” (p. 234).

So much for human agency, political choice, and debates among alternatives.

In the end, however, the most disturbing thing about Katz’s letter is not the content but the tone. Disagreement and debate are the lifeblood of the academic enterprise. Criticism is what we risk when we go public with our work. Given that, the manner in which we respond to one another is crucial—there are ways to encourage debate and ways to stifle it. Katz’s letter is another episode in what has been a long-running effort to intimidate his critics into silence. In 1974, Katz engaged in an angry exchange with Denton and George who dared suggest that Katz use regression analysis instead of cross tabulations (*HEQ* v. 14, Summer 1974). Katz has since adopted multivariate analysis without, as far as I know, ever publicly acknowledging his debt to Denton and George. Fol-

lowing Diane Ravitch's criticism in *The Revisionists Revised*, Katz denounced not only her work but also her motives. More recently, his savage review of *The Troubled Crusade* (HEQ v. 25, Spring-Summer 1985)—obviously written before he adopted the code of conduct for book reviewers that he claims I violated—marks a particular low point in professional discourse in educational history. Finally, in response to Maris Vinovskis's critique of Katz's Beverly study, Katz took what was an engaging two-sided debate in HEQ (v. 27, Summer 1987), and published only his side of the argument in his most recent book, *Reconstructing American Education*. While there is a wonderful Zen-like quality to that effort, it hardly meets the standards of academic professionalism. Katz's letter about my review is one more example of his inability to handle criticism, something that, unfortunately, has become a hallmark of his career.

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Editorial Note: Letters to the editor are printed verbatim.