REVIEW
RECLAIMING THE PUBLIC SPHERE

Joseph Harris


These are moving, hopeful books, engaged in a common project: the defense of public schooling, and more generally of public life, in America. And yet they are striking in their differences: Mike Rose’s Possible Lives is a large, sprawling volume, a cousin of the nineteenth-century novel, whose arguments are less stated than implied in a long and engrossing series of narratives about teachers and teaching. Deborah Meier’s The Power of Their Ideas is more fiercely intellectual, a kind of extended Partisan Review essay, in which she draws freely on her experiences as a Harlem principal while still briskly subordinating such accounts to a compelling argument for revitalizing public schools. And Michael Katz’s Improving Poor People is at once the most academic and the most personal of the three, as he blends rich and humane historical research on the lives of poor people with a deft set of anecdotes telling of how he came to his own fusion of scholarship and activism. Despite these differences in form, the three books share much in mood and character. After reading them, I was left feeling that the authors are the sort of people I’d want teaching my children, and the sort of intellectuals who can help us reform (rather than simply abandon) one of our last great public institutions: our schools.

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In many ways the work of Michael Katz sets the stage for that of Rose and Meier, and so I will begin here with his *Improving Poor People*. Much of Katz’s career as a historian has been devoted to tracing the ways large centralized bureaucracies have impinged on the lives of ordinary people. In particular, Katz is intrigued and outraged by the ways social reformers have long misspent much of their energy in attempts to “improve the character of poor people rather than attack the material sources of their misery” (3), as they try to determine who is most deserving of their services, to sort out the “worthy poor” or “truly needy” from a seemingly feckless “underclass.” And, as Katz points out, “as a strategy, improving poor people consistently has awarded education a starring role” (4). There is no cheaper brand of social reform than schooling, as it allows us to recast social ills as individual failings, to see the real problem as not unemployment but the unemployed, not poverty but the poor, not welfare but those made dependent on it. The faculty need “better material to work with”—this was how a trustee of my own university put the problem in response to calls for a renewed focus on undergraduate teaching. And so public schools have long been assigned the impossible task of redressing the injuries of urban poverty by improving the character and discipline of its victims, turning them into better material for universities and corporations to work with.

Or the nearly impossible task. Only one of the essays that make up *Improving Poor People* focuses directly on education, but it is that chapter which gives the book its sense of hope and promise. Katz begins his book with essays on the history of public welfare programs and of ways of talking about the “culture of poverty” that document an ongoing stinginess of the imagination in America, a quick readiness to blame the poor for the misery inflicted upon them. And he closes with a set of stories about the lives of poor people in the early 1900s that could make a stone weep. But set in between these despairing accounts is an essay on the recent and continuing reform of the Chicago public schools, in which control over public education has been wrested from a huge centralized bureaucracy and placed into the hands of some 600 school-community councils. As someone who calls himself “an unreconstructed democrat” (6), Katz sees this experiment in local control as a sign that alternatives still exist to both the dangers of privatization and the stultifying effects of the bureaucratic status quo, that we still have the chance to reclaim the public sphere.

Katz asks himself repeatedly through *Improving Poor People* how as a historian he might best enter into current social debates and causes. One of his answers is that history can help us guard against a sense of inevitability, against a belief that things were somehow bound to take the forms that they have. In discussing Chicago school reform, then, Katz wants to show how the sort of massive educational bureaucracy that we now take for granted in our cities had to struggle throughout the late nineteenth century to emerge as the victor among several competing models for administering the schools. (He makes this same argument in
compelling detail in his 1992 *Reconstructing American Education* [Harvard University Press].) Centralized systems have served the concerns of administrators for efficiency and economy far better than they have ever addressed the more varied needs of teachers and students, Katz argues, and it has long been in the self-interest of educational bureaucrats to act as if the mandarin networks of control and supervision they have set up are “not only appropriate but inescapable” (119). The turning of responsibility for the Chicago schools to local committees of neighbors, teachers, and parents thus represents for Katz a possible way out of the prison house of history, a way of imagining not only new curricula but new forms of governance for the schools.

In their zeal to change what goes on in classrooms, Katz suggests, reformers have usually failed to attack the corporate structure of large public school systems, or the culture of specialized expertise that undergirds their administration. “Reforms have shifted around the furniture of education without moving walls or rebuilding structures that contained it” (123). As a result, reform movements have often placed an enormous strain on individual teachers, asking them to take on the burden of change without creating new conditions of work to support their innovations. What excites Katz about the experiment in Chicago is how its success rests not on the heroism of a few but on the involvement of many. As he puts it:

> In fact, with support, Chicago school reform will legitimate local democracy. As it trains local school council members in parliamentary procedures, the analysis of budgets, the selection of principals, the evaluation of curricula and many other matters, Chicago school reform is a vast engine of adult education for developing effective citizens. (142)

Katz is not a Pollyanna, however. He notes that the impetus for reform in Chicago came out of an unusual set of circumstances (involving both the election of a dynamic black mayor, Harold Washington, and his unexpected death, which allowed the project he helped begin to take its own shape); that some of its political consequences have been troubling (the decentralizing of the school bureaucracy, for instance, entailed the loss of hundreds of jobs held by middle-class African Americans); that local control does not always guarantee good decision-making; and that the gains of reform will always depend on adequate funding for the schools. And, indeed, when Mike Rose reports on his visit to Chicago, his account shows that the progress of reform there varies widely and troublingly from site to site, and Deborah Meier’s whole book can be read as evidence of the extraordinary leadership and intelligence required to make any sort of local school reform work. But Katz convinces me that a key shift has occurred in how Chicagoleans imagine their schools—moving from a sense of the public as the arena of last resort, the place where they have to let you in (Katz documents the long association of *public* and *pauper*), to a view of it as a place of possibility, of collective concern and effort.
But merely to summarize Katz’s arguments would be to slight much of what is most remarkable about his writing here. For *Improving Poor People* is not only about history and public policy, it is also a kind of *apologia pro vita sua*, a tracing out of how Katz came to do this sort of history and why it matters to him. As is perhaps the case with most careers, many of the key moments in Katz’s work seem more the result of chance than plan: entering Harvard’s MAT program as a way of funding his graduate study and discovering an unexpected joy in and commitment to teaching; taking a summer job at a settlement house in Cambridge and seeing poverty as something lived through rather than as a problem to be solved; signing on to task forces and committees out of a sense of duty and finding in them a new intellectual excitement; catching a report on the late-night news and tracking it down the next day (this is how he first became involved with the Chicago schools). But underneath these chance occurrences lie Katz’s consistent curiosity and passion, along with an open and free admiration for good work when he sees it, and a willingness to commit his considerable energies to issues and causes that attract him. His *Improving Poor People* offers a stirring vision of intellectual life.

A similar energy runs through Deborah Meier’s *The Power of Their Ideas*. Since 1974 Meier has been the driving force behind the Central Park East schools in Harlem—four small and innovative public schools laboring “under all the constraints of” the vast New York City educational system (15), but whose curricula have been formed, debated, and reformed by the teachers working in them. “Our experience suggested that a strong school culture requires that most decisions be struggled over and made by those directly responsible for implementing them, not by representative bodies handing down dictates for others to follow,” says Meier (24). This means that schools must be kept small and that students, parents, and teachers must hold some real control over (and not just offer input concerning) what goes on in them. The logic of bureaucracy says that this is impossible in a large urban school system, that some centralized control is needed to insure order, economy, efficiency, and fairness. Meier wants to use the CPE schools as examples to the contrary, as proof that local democracy can still thrive within the confines of a giant school system.

First, Meier needs to show that small schools can work economically, which she does by breaking down the association between schools and school-buildings. One can have several small, autonomous schools and teaching staffs all sharing space within a single building, as indeed has been the case with the CPE schools. The key thing is bringing people together as part of a common project. And if the teaching staff of a school is handling much of what used to be done by a central administration in terms of forming curricula and managing day-to-day school life, then less can indeed be more. Smallness also helps teachers and students feel accountable to each other, and thus adds to a general sense of physical safety and comfort. The real cost, it would seem, is time and energy: the willingness of everyone
involved to work through goals and procedures (ranging all the way from dress codes to graduation requirements) that in other schools would ordinarily have been set for them.

What a principal needs to do is to set up conditions that encourage both experiment and dialogue, to create a school where teachers get to act on their ideas but are also held responsible for explaining what they are doing to their colleagues. As Meier puts it:

The kind of changes required by today's agenda can only be the work of thoughtful teachers. Either we acknowledge and create conditions based on this fact, conditions for teachers to work collectively and collaboratively and openly, or we create conditions that encourage resistance, secrecy, and sabotage. Teachers who believe in spelling tests every Friday or are “hooked on phonics” sneak them in, even when they’re taboo. And so do those who want good books or fewer workbooks, regardless of school regulations. The braver and more conscientious cheat the most, but even the timid can’t practice well what they don’t believe in. (108)

What I most admire about this passage (and many others in Meier) is its sense of restraint. If a principal wants her staff to act as agents, as reflective practitioners, to teach according to their own commitments and beliefs, then she must resist imposing her own agenda—however perspicuous or enlightened—upon them. And if in some cases such restraint results not in whole language teaching (for example) but in somewhat improved workbook drills or spelling tests, then this must be accepted. Underneath Meier’s commitment to openness lies a faith in the goodwill and intelligence of teachers, in their willingness to rethink what they are doing in conversation with their peers. And underneath that lies a rare sort of intellectual humility, an ability to admit that there just might be something, after all, to workbooks or spelling tests (even if I can’t quite see it now), and thus a commitment to ongoing conversation rather than to forced change (which wouldn’t work anyway).

But if Meier seems such an extraordinary manager it is perhaps because she conceives of administration as teaching. Near the end of The Power of Their Ideas, Meier briefly lists a set of what might be called democratic virtues, using the term not in the moralistic sense recently made popular by William Bennett but in the classical sense of the habits of thinking that we would want the citizens of our polis to possess. What sort of intellectual traits do we want to inculcate in our children? Meier suggests: curiosity, watchfulness, playfulness, skepticism, the ability to take on competing viewpoints, a respect for evidence, articulateness, empathy, and a plain willingness to work hard (170–71). These seem to me wonderful cross-disciplinary goals for learning, far more flexible and useful than the academic standards recently developed for English and other subjects. (Interestingly, they also strongly resemble the Critical Strategies for Academic Thinking and Writing that Mike Rose and Malcolm Kiniry have elaborated in their textbook for college students [Bed-
ford Books, 1993].) And, tellingly, they are also almost precisely the qualities that Meier earlier in her book says she looks for in hiring teachers for her schools:

If I could choose five qualities to look for in prospective teachers they would be (1) a self-conscious reflectiveness about how they themselves learn and (maybe even more) about how and when they don’t learn; (2) a sympathy toward others, an appreciation of differences, an ability to imagine one’s own “otherness”; (3) a willingness, better yet a taste, for working collaboratively; (4) a passion for having others share some of one’s own interests; and then (5) a lot of perseverance, energy, and devotion to getting things right! (142)

Here is a view of schooling that does not separate teachers and students into experts and novices but that rather brings them together as struggling, in perhaps different ways and at varying levels, to cultivate very similar habits of thinking. Much as Katz sees the very process of Chicago school reform as a “vast engine of adult education” with effects well beyond the classroom, so Meier sees the ongoing dialogue among the teachers at CPE, the time-consuming process of collectively figuring and refiguring out what they want to do and why, as “our primary form of staff development. When people ask me how we ‘train’ new teachers, I say that the school itself is an educator for both the kids and staff” (109). The excitement in the classrooms in Chicago and Harlem is a result, then, not of some new educational theory but of teachers gaining a new sense of power and responsibility, of being able to make changes that matter.

This sense of agency characterizes all of the otherwise disparate teachers that Mike Rose meets and talks with in Possible Lives. These are all people who have claimed ownership of their work in the classroom, who have imagined what they are doing as indeed their work and not as the delivery of some pre-set curriculum or lesson plan. They are intellectuals who are interested in the ways “one’s knowledge plays out in social space” (419), in how people come to know as well as what they know. A key difference between Meier and Rose is hinted at in their titles: On the one hand, while Meier often offers lovely snippets of life in the CPE schools, where her voice comes through most powerfully is in her ideas, her argument for the value of public schooling; Rose, on the other hand, is absorbed in the lives of the people he has met, in the details of classroom experience. The difference is a matter not simply of style but also of aim: Meier wants to argue for a certain kind of school, Rose wants to defend the work of teachers. Despite the Whitmanesque quality of much of Possible Lives, the impulse behind it seems to have been a kind of anger (or at the very least frustration) with the many recent critics of public education who have not ever bothered to visit and observe actual classrooms, to see for themselves the work that is going on in them.

It is a rich and loving view of life within the classroom that Rose offers. In a kind of democratic picaresque, he travels from city to country, LA to Polaris to Chicago to Hattiesburg, sitting in on classrooms in grade schools and high schools,
on lessons in math and science and language, reporting back on teachers who work hard, sensibly, and caringly with their charges, sometimes struggling against what seem the bleakest of odds, and often connecting with the minds of kids in remarkable ways. If I wasn’t already a teacher, this book would make me want to become one. Now I wish I could be more like the teachers Rose meets: Bob Moses, for instance, a former civil rights activist who continues (now in Mississippi) to work for social access as the founder of a project designed to ready junior-high kids to learn algebra—a subject key to advanced study in the sciences and long a stumbling block to success in school for many minority children. Or Steve Gilbert, whose AP literature class in Chicago reminded me of why teaching literature once seemed such an exciting and powerful thing to do. Or Carlos Jimenez, a high school teacher in East Los Angeles who wrote his own textbook on Mexican American history when he couldn’t find needed sources and materials. Or Stephanie Terry, a first-grade teacher in Baltimore who meets the demands of a standardized curriculum while creating a classroom that is child-centered, interdisciplinary, filled with talk, reading, and writing, and fused to the life and concerns of the African-American community of which it is part. Or . . . almost any of the others from the long and triumphant list of local heroes in Possible Lives. A feeling of physical safety, of emotional warmth, of intellectual experiment, of surprise and play and perseverance marks almost all of the classrooms that Rose visits. They seem like places where one would want to be.

Rose says his aim in writing is to enable a more “capacious critique” of public education (4), to counter the horror stories that routinely dominate talk about our schools with a sense of the possible, the concretely utopian, of what classrooms can be at their best. In this he succeeds admirably. Rose has a reporter’s eye and ear; his prose is muscular and fluent, rich with detail and yet surprisingly quick in its pacing. A brief “Note on Method” at the end of the book shows a flexible curiosity at work that shame much professional ethnography. Rose seems to have done whatever he could to get the lived feel of a school and classroom: helping kids with their seatwork, chatting in hallways, roaming neighborhoods, xeroxing, photographing, taping, note-taking, “shooting baskets or walking around the yard with a kid who was having a bad day” (435). Rose admits that he was hardly a detached observer of the students and teachers he met with, but he also argues that:

If detachment can sharpen vision, it can also limit what is seen and felt. If it was the messy, complex life of classrooms I wanted to understand, then it was precisely these various forms of participation that could help me see and feel. (435–36)

We need more work like this, more writing that aims not only to see but to feel. Sometimes, in reading Possible Lives, I found myself wishing that Rose would move past the scene of the classroom, to look more at the systems and structures that help these teachers work so well. I also grew frustrated at points with what
seemed the book’s lack of narrative drive; unlike Lives on the Boundary (Free Press, 1989), which is given shape and momentum by the unfolding story of Rose’s own education, each chapter of Possible Lives tells much the same story, makes much the same point about agency and hope in teaching. Yet the power of the book rests not on the story of a single classroom but on the accumulated sense that there are many such classrooms and stories to be found across the country. If these teachers are heroes, then there are many heroes among us. And what, in the end, is perhaps most heroic about Possible Lives is the way in which Rose refuses to allow it to become a more familiar sort of academic book, to slide into a more familiar language of theory and analysis. Along with Katz and Meier, Rose shows us a way past the level of critique, of limits to be noted, and toward a sense of alternatives, of work to be done.