

**Katz, Michael B.; Doucet, Michael J.; and Stern, Mark J. *The Social Organization of Early Industrial Capitalism*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982, Pp. ix, 444**

**David Gagan**

---

Volume 12, Number 1, June 1983

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1019008ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1019008ar>

[See table of contents](#)

---

Publisher(s)

Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine

ISSN

0703-0428 (print)

1918-5138 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

---

Cite this review

Gagan, D. (1983). Review of [Katz, Michael B.; Doucet, Michael J.; and Stern, Mark J. *The Social Organization of Early Industrial Capitalism*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982, Pp. ix, 444]. *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, 12(1), 93–94. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1019008ar>

Katz, Michael B.; Doucet, Michael J.; and Stern, Mark J. *The Social Organization of Early Industrial Capitalism*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982, Pp. ix, 444.

Michael Katz's earlier historical social analysis of a mid-nineteenth-century Upper Canadian city, *The People of Hamilton, Canada West*, introduced Canadian historians to the concerns of the "new" social history, especially of quantitative social and structural and demographic history. The size and structure of families and households, rates of vocational and geographical mobility, the cycle of family life and the nature of individual life-cycle experiences (especially among the young), the nature of work and the distribution of its rewards and, withal, the structure of inequality in the commercial city as revealed by the social and economic distances between the population's various ethnic, religious, occupational and demographic cohorts formed the substance of Katz's preliminary report. In spite of the book's sometimes breathless reportage, its limited chronological parameters and its fuzzy contextual framework, and in spite, more particularly of the well-springs of professional anxiety that overflowed at the appearance of high-tech history, *The People of Hamilton, Canada West* carried off a well-deserved prize for its daring admixture of hard data and rash speculation.

*The Social Organization of Early Industrial Capitalism*, Katz's second volume on Hamilton's social history, written in collaboration with Michael Doucet and Mark Stern, has now appeared. In it, Katz's former sense of discovery and exploration has been replaced by ideological commitment to the proposition that the "structured inequality of social experience," past and present, reflects the "reality and permanence of class" which was neither "accidental nor ephemeral." It was inherent, according to Katz's model and his conclusions, in the relations between capital and labour generally and, in mid-Victorian Hamilton specifically, in the economic organization of the early industrializing city. This is the argument of the book's first chapter, "A Two Class Model." The remaining eight chapters, on social stratification, transiency, property ownership, social mobility, crime, adolescence, and the family, are devoted to testing this proposition. To accomplish this, Katz, Doucet and Stern abandon the simple descriptive statistics of Katz's earlier book in favour of complex multivariate techniques which permit them to sort among an extensive catalogue of explanatory variables to assess the relative power of "class," or its surrogates (principally occupation and wealth) to illuminate the structures of social inequality in Hamilton, 1851-1871, and to compare those results with similar data generated for Buffalo and for Erie County, New York, their control population.

In some respects, the resulting analysis is a *tour de force*. The two class model is a simple, elegant hypothesis, all the more useful because it describes the world of urban-industrial social reality as nineteenth-century Canadians saw it. The book, then, tests *their* assumptions rather than an academic construct. The chapter on social stratification finally establishes that occupation was the most important single determinant of wealth and of membership in one or the other of Hamilton's two classes. The authors' discussion of social mobility reaffirms Katz's earlier contention that a high degree of individual fluidity was compatible with structural rigidity; but there the focus is vastly sharpened to explore the roots of that structural rigidity, the inheritance of occupations which "assured the reproduction of inequality." In the end, the key to class appears to have been "social origin." Finally, the description of the cycles, the structure and the economy of the family adds an important new dimension to our understanding of the historical sensitivity of the family, which E.A. Wrigley described as the elemental building block of society, to its economic environment, and its agility in adapting to changes in that environment.

In certain other respects *The Social Organization of Early Industrial Capitalism* is rather less successful. The chapter on transiency adds little to our knowledge of that phenomenon, either substantively or methodologically. The analysis of crime in Hamilton is disappointing; and criminality in Hamilton appears to have disappointed the authors both in its limited extent and restricted variety. But they may have asked the wrong questions. How much crime there was, who was responsible for it, and what crimes they committed may be less revealing than, say, the spatial distribution of crimes against persons or property, the relationship between business cycles and levels of criminal activity, or the attitudes (class attitudes, presumably) which explain the homogeneity of jail populations in places like Hamilton. Similarly, the chapter on "Youth and Early Industrialization" lacks authority. Katz returns to his earlier preoccupations with the semi-autonomy/semi-dependence conundrum characteristic of youth in pre-industrial society and posits that industrialization ought to have hastened the advent of independence through the proliferation of economic opportunities. Instead, the authors find only another conundrum. A whole generation of working-class youths freely opted, in the 1860s and 1870s, for more, not fewer years of dependence in their parents' households. The authors conclude, lamely, that culture was apparently a stronger force than either economic opportunism or biological necessity.

This conclusion, or lack of conclusion, illustrates a fundamental weakness of *The Social Organization of Early Industrial Capitalism*. Readers of *The People of Hamilton* seized upon Wilson Benson's gulliverian narrative as welcome relief from the burden of numerical exegesis. In this volume, no such relief is available. The

analysis proceeds relentlessly from one multivariate complexity to the next with scarcely a concession to the usual conventions of historical reporting. The difficulty is that what the numbers cannot explain remains unexplained, or left in the realm of speculation, as in the example cited above. The result, in any event, is a book peculiarly devoid of primary evidence from non-numerical sources, evidence which might have bridged the gap between speculation and substance and, at the very least, might have partially muffled the sound of numbers being crunched.

In the same vein, Katz's penchant for treating the many limited worlds of nineteenth-century urban social experience as a single, homogeneous universe for the purpose of legitimizing his hypotheses and conclusions is often infelicitous. It is one thing to write comparative history where the framework for comparison is methodologically explicit. It is quite another to draw parallels with other places in a way which obliterates distinctions of time, space, culture and environment as device for peeling away the layers of unique events which surround and explain Hamilton's past but which get in the way of the new historical positivism. This tendency surfaces, at its worst, in the authors' concluding chapter, "Early Industrial Capitalism: The Institutional Legacy," in which Hamilton is never mentioned, although we learn a good deal about the attitudes of contemporary New Yorkers, Bostonians, Catherine Beecher and Horace Mann, and the opinions of more recent American academic commentators.

On balance, then, *The Social Organization of Early Industrial Capitalism* is unlikely to fulfill the expectations of scholars who admired *The People of Hamilton*. In spite of its expanded temporal framework, the book brings us no closer than its predecessor to an appreciation of the interplay of change and continuity in the lives of those people, of the processes which determined the sway of fixity and discontinuity in their society, or of the social, cultural and political assumptions which the "reality and permanence of class" nurtured in them.

David Gagan  
Dean of Humanities  
McMaster University

---

Mauer, David W. *Language of the Underworld*. Allan W. Futrell and Charles B. Wordell, eds. Foreword by Berg Flexner. Lexington, Kentucky: University of Kentucky Press, 1981. Pp. 417. \$30.00.

David Mauer was a socio-linguist who examined the links between language and behaviour in American society. *Language of the Underworld* is a posthumous

collection of his articles written from 1930 to 1970. Each selection includes two brief introductions by Mauer: one written when the essay was first published, and another written in 1978 as a commentary upon the original work. As well, most of the essays include a glossary of words extracted from the argot, or speech pattern, of particular criminal sub-groups.

Students of urban crime will find this collection illuminating. Mauer concentrates upon those criminals who operate in urban settings, although he also studies moonshiners and other non-urban lawbreakers. He introduces us to a cast of "jug heavies," "con men," "whiz mobs," and "nautch girls," all of whom depend upon the city for their livelihood.

Mauer's prefatory remarks add depth to his examination of criminal sub-groups. In most of these articles, he studies the relation between the social status of a group and the nature of its argot. Prostitutes, for instance, have a mundane argot reflecting their marginal position within even the underworld:

Whatever system a prostitute may work under she never develops a sense of trade, of group solidarity, of gang morale. . . She is never permitted to develop professional independence, which appears to be the first essential in the formation of criminal argots.

Mauer's analysis, based in socio-linguistics, can thus challenge historians' conceptions of criminal life. We are aware that lawbreakers live in the shadow of the dominant culture, but we still know little about the social hierarchy *within* criminal sub-cultures.

One of Mauer's more interesting assertions concerns the changing technology of crime. While some criminal speech patterns persist over generations, others shift continually. "Whiz mobs," or pickpockets, have used similar techniques for centuries and consequently some use terms which were current in the sixteenth century. Safecrackers, or "jug heavies," however search continually for more sophisticated techniques requiring up-dated terminology: theirs is a very contemporary argot.

Mauer tells us that "argots live principally in the minds and on the tongues of individuals. . ."; written records are rare. His evidence is colourful but limited necessarily to the twentieth century. It is the oral historian, then, who could most directly benefit from this collection. Mauer's work provides a "feel" for criminal lifestyles unmatched by traditional sources.

While the socio-linguistic study of sub-cultures certainly broadens our understanding, it cannot answer all questions. Mauer's enthusiasm for his field, however, is