

David W Fletcher, October 2002

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MICHAEL B. KATZ'S *THE PRICE OF CITIZENSHIP:  
REDEFINING THE AMERICAN WELFARE STATE*

Katz's *The Price of Citizenship* shows how United States welfare policy in the 1990s capitulated to market models and how this unfortunate shift relegated millions of displaced and impoverished Americans to commodity status. Katz believes that the arbitrary connection between work and public benefits, the erosion of accessible and affordable health care for all citizens, and the demise of entitlements for the nation's poor highlight as critical the need to expand "the meaning, boundaries, and prerogatives of citizenship" (359).

Katz artfully weaves a tapestry of economic, political, and social history. But his true aim is to identify a cultural problem in America, namely, the pervasive takeover of political and social spheres by free market capitalism and its corporate henchmen. Katz clearly affirms that the nation's leaders have succumbed to the temptations of pragmatism and have failed to infuse the debate over social welfare with classic "questions of political and moral philosophy" (341).

No doubt, while Katz sides with the more liberal persuasion on the basic legitimacy of public welfare as a tool for social stability, he does not accept the policies of the Left perfunctorily. He criticizes Liberals and applauds Conservatives, especially when the well-being of the poor is at stake. Katz perhaps does fall back on the old argument that links greater spending for social programs with greater social justice. But, in his defense, a good argument can be made to tie increased welfare expenditures, whether from federal, state, or local fund, to increased benefits for the poor.

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Importantly, Katz's work identifies an American cultural transition of the late twentieth-century—the infusion of consumerism into the political realm—whereby the concept of citizenship has been redefined negatively for many unsuspecting Americans.