

## ***HEQA - Lauren Lefty***

[00:00:00] **Jack Schneider:** Welcome to *HEQ&A*, the podcast of the *History of Education Quarterly*. I'm your host, *HEQ* co-editor Jack Schneider. Every few weeks, we'll dive into recent work from the journal, asking authors how their projects challenge or extend what we know about a topic, exploring what's interesting and surprising about it, and then taking a step back to consider broader implications. In the second half of the show, we turn our sights to teaching. So, if you're an educator, make sure to stick around until the end. And now let's hear from one of our authors.

[00:00:49] **Lauren Lefty:** My name is Lauren Lefty. I recently finished my PhD in the history of education from New York University. And I'm currently serving as an ACLS Leading Edge Fellow with the Children's Defense Fund's Freedom Schools program. My article is entitled "Puerto Rico can teach so much: The Hemispheric and Imperial Origins of the Educational War on Poverty." My piece aims to uncover the ways that the post-war educational war on poverty developed not only in light of domestic politics, but also through transnational and imperial dynamics, particularly connections between New York City, the colonial Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, and Latin America more broadly.

[00:01:30] So ultimately I'm really trying to show how cold war American empire was central in the development post-war education policy. So this narrative is big, uh, geographically, temporarily. Uh, so I organize the article into four parts to tell this story. First, I start by highlighting the role of education in the post-war body of scholarship known as modernization theory. Uh, so modernization theory in brief was a set of ideas that attempted to explain how quote unquote pre-modern or traditional societies transitioned into developed and modern nations. I'm this was according to the definition of modernity put forward by mainly White American liberals. So think industrialism, capitalism, representative democracy, um, you know, something in short that looked a lot like the United States.

[00:02:23] This group of scholars, including figures like Walt Rostow and Talcott Parsons, they posited that education was the single greatest investment that nations could make on the path to development, or, you know what they'd called "take off." Human capital theory in part comes out of this tradition: um, you know, an investment in people equals an investment in macro level economic growth. And these ideas heavily shaped the US as

approach to Cold War foreign aid. As Americans tried to win hearts and minds across the world, and particularly in the Global South through development programs.

[00:02:58] So in my second section, I then show how these ideas about education's role in modernization theory found particularly ample ground in Puerto Rico following World War II. Uh, Puerto Rico has been a colonial territory of the US since 1898 and gained only slightly more sovereignty in 1952, when it became a commonwealth. The newly elected governor of that Commonwealth, Luís Muñoz Marín, was a liberal who decided to strategically partner with the prosperous postwar US and he offered up the island as what he called a quote laboratory of democracy. And it became a kind of a model of capitalist development in the American mold. Uh, Puerto Rico therefore became this really important place to test and produce modernization theory. Um, and this was reflected in the island's economic development plan, tellingly named Operation Bootstrap, uh, which is, you know, a really rich metaphor to mind for historians of education. Uh, but perhaps not surprisingly given the tenants of modernization theory that I was just describing, Bootstrap placed education at the center of its project.

[00:04:12] So I detailed in the article, how education spending and programming, uh, proliferated on a really momentous scale in this era, hundreds of classrooms were built, enrollment numbers skyrocketed, uh, vocational education became huge. And interestingly, we see a community education program that used the language of community action and the service of a quote war on poverty as, as early as the late forties on the island. So as a laboratory, post-war Puerto Rico becomes a kind of crossroads for spreading liberal ideas about development and education across the hemisphere.

[00:04:50] So in the third part of the article, I detail Puerto Rico's Operation Bootstrap became a kind of blueprint for American development and philanthropic programs and other countries, particularly in Latin America through the Alliance for Progress. And this was the, the sixties era US foreign aid program directed specifically toward that region. Two prominent Puerto Ricans are appointed to the Alliance task force, for example. Uh, the Peace Corps sets up a training site there, and actually thousands of people from all over the world, visit the island to see what they're doing.

[00:05:26] And finally, the fourth and last part of my article then shows how this is not just a foreign or colonial story. Um, all this becomes really important to what happens in the US, especially in a place like New York. So as poverty becomes a focus of attention domestically, uh, during the Kennedy years, and obviously during Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty, educational ideas that had been employed in Puerto Rico and Latin America start to come back home. Um, and this is especially as cities become more racially and ethnically diverse, uh, and especially in New York where the Puerto Rican Great Migration brings thousands of Puerto Rican families to the city starting in the late forties. Uh, so New York and Puerto Rico become really closely linked through these liberal policy and political channels, but also through the diaspora.

[00:06:22] Many people who had been working in international development, uh, saw similarities between what they viewed as, you know, what they would call "underdeveloped nations of color" abroad, right. And what were thought to be underdeveloped communities of color at home. Um, so I show how these ideas, these liberal ideas like community action and self-help, human capital development, um, but also people like Sergeant Shriver, Joseph Montserrat, Leonard Covello, um, they were all circulating between Puerto Rico, other Latin American countries, and New York. And this impacted the educational programming that was geared toward Black and Latinx students in the nation's largest school district.

[00:07:03] Uh, so, so big picture with this article. I'm trying to show how you can't tell the full story of post-war education politics in a place like New York without engaging what was happening abroad, especially in the colonial territory of Puerto Rico because of its unique colonial relationship to the US, and in that city in particular.

[00:07:28] When we talk about the major milestones of post-war education. So think Elementary and Secondary Education Act, Headstart, compensatory ed, bilingual ed, you know, we often narrate those developments within the context of a domestic civil rights movement, um, or maybe the growth of the liberal state. And when we do embrace a more global Cold War lens, our minds, um, and our historiography, right, often focuses on the Soviets and anti-communism, which makes a lot of sense. Yet what I aim to do with my work is show how the global Cold War, particularly in Latin America and the so-called Third World also shaped all of these domestic education policies.

[00:08:11] Uh, so I'd also say that when we think of the relationship between empire and education and colonial policy influencing domestic affairs, we often think about the Progressive Era, right? Um, late 19th and early 20th century figures, traveling to the Philippines, Hawaii, Puerto Rico, um, implementing similar kind of educational ideas and racial logics on populations at home, you know, whether that be Native American children or, uh, Black students across the South and vice versa. Yet, I think this lens, uh, which is an important historiographical shift in the literature on empire, linking colonies to metropolises. This also applies to the post-war years in terms of American education policy. So other historians have documented this in the fact, uh, or in the realm of policing, uh, economic policy, even higher education. So think, you know, the Cold War University, for example, but I try and argue it also applies to K-12 schooling too.

[00:09:18] I was often surprised myself at how once you followed the career trajectories of certain academics or the origins of certain policies, it became very hard to disentangle what was happening domestically and what was happening abroad. Um, so many liberal policy makers that are important to the field of post-war education. So I'm thinking again, Sargent Shriver, Oscar Lewis, um, who had his nefarious cultural pathology idea, McGeorge Bundy, Covello, all of these guys had connections to foreign aid and or Puerto Rico specifically. Um, you know, my research on Puerto Rican education activism in New York actually didn't start as a transnational story, but the sources led me there. Um, and in my broader work, I also think about how border crossing and empire influenced grassroots education activism too.

[00:10:12] I think the broader implications of this work or that we have to take seriously, the link between education, race, and empire, um, and start telling more global histories in order to understand, uh, domestic as well as international inequality. So it was Dubois who said in 1903, that the problem of the 20th century was going to be the global color line, and in many ways he was right. Um, so the, the radical Black and Puerto Rican activists of the late sixties and seventies that I also look to in my larger research, you know, they're, they're always pointing to the triple threat of racism, capitalism, and imperialism. Um, so I think it's time, you know, our histories of American education also revived this more internationalist approach to thinking about racial equity, um, you know, which if you're a person of the left, you know, this may seem quite obvious. You know, these are not new arguments. But the emphasis has fallen away a bit, um, in our master narratives, if you will, of US post-war educational history. Uh, so I don't think that means you abandoned

national or local frames, uh, which are particularly salient in education, right. Um, but you also take into account border crossing and global dynamics.

[00:11:29] And then, uh, moreover just quickly, I'd say, you know, we're talking a lot about decolonizing education these days and you know what that means and why it's so important. Uh, so I think it's crucial to explore the more recent history of American empire and its continued forms. Uh, Puerto Rico is still a colony of the United States, for example, uh, the recent withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan also revived discussions of US empire. Um, you know, and its more modern incarnations. So our liberal policies are often bound up with imperial practices, you know, think about what was happening in the realm of foreign policy during the Johnson years when he launched the war on poverty at home. Uh, think about the disaster capitalism that has taken place in Puerto Rico, post debt crisis and Hurricane Maria. Um, decolonization, as many Indigenous activists say, is not a metaphor.

[00:12:25] **Jack Schneider:** The second half of the show is dedicated to thinking about teaching. We ask authors to put on their guest lecturer hats and take students into the weeds. What should they pay attention to, methodologically speaking? What else should they be reading if they want to take a deep dive into the historiography? And where are there opportunities for further research?

[00:12:45] **Lauren Lefty:** I am by no means the first to do this, but I do embrace a transnational methodology within a global frame. Uh, I'm interested in the relationship between the global and the local. And I also specifically use the term "transnational colonial" in my work, uh, which was coined by sociologist, Jorge Duany to analyze how people, ideas and practices cross colonial borders between New York and Puerto Rico, and what impact that had. And then as I mentioned, a trend in the literature on empire is thinking about how colonial policies impact the metropole. This approach has been around a while and you know, there's a lot of great work on other European and colonial regions, uh, specifically in the history of education, but there's still a lot of exciting thinking that can be done in the U S in the post-war context, um, I think often because we don't think of the U S as an empire necessarily.

[00:13:44] Yeah. I have a long list of amazing scholars whose work inspired mine, but I'll, I'll try to limit it to a few. Um, so if you're looking to learn more about the history of Puerto Rican education, I definitely recommend Solsiree del Moral's book, *Negotiating Empire*. Um, and this tells the story of US

educational colonialism in Puerto Rico from 1898, uh, to 1952, so sort of the pre-history to the era I'm talking about. Um, it specifically looks at the role of teachers in imperial negotiation.

[00:14:15] I'd also recommend Clif Stratton's *Education for Empire*, which focuses on the Progressive Era. Uh, for an excellent book that takes a transnational approach to the history of education and looks across the border to Mexico, um, I can't recommend enough. Ruben Flores's *Backroads Pragmatist*. And this reveals how Mexico's educational thought and policy influenced mid century American progressive educators. Um, and then finally, you know, if you're interested in the phenomenon of Cold War development aid, and foreign policy in the Global South, and how that impacted domestic politics, I'd recommend both Daniel Immerwahr's *Thinking Small*, which traces the idea of community development from its international to domestic forms and Stuart Schrader's *Badges Beyond [Without] Borders*, uh, which shows how Cold War counterinsurgency tactics then came to influence domestic policing strategy and strategies, targeting communities of color. So again, yes, this is a shortlist from, from a lot of great work that influenced my own.

[00:15:24] I would love to see how, uh, American empire and the global Cold War impacted other realms of education and in other places too. So I allude to some of this in the article and explore some of this in my larger dissertation project, but programs like educational testing, privatization, uh, early childhood education. You know, these were all areas where American policymakers who came to implement these programs in, in poor racialized communities in the US had already done something similar abroad through Cold War development aid. Um, so I'd also love to see some work on U S educational programming in Asia, for example, in post-war Japan, maybe Vietnam or South Korea, um, how that impacted what was done in the U S for example. So there's a lot to explore here, I think.

[00:16:18] **Jack Schneider:** Check out *History of Education Quarterly* online. The journal is published by Cambridge University Press and it's carried by most academic libraries. You should also be sure to follow *HEQ* Twitter handle: @histedquarterly, which regularly sends out free read-only versions of articles, and the show's Twitter handle @HEQandA. And don't forget, subscribe to the show so you don't miss forthcoming episodes. We're available on iTunes, Stitcher, and wherever you get your podcasts. HEQ&A is produced at the University of Massachusetts Lowell. Our producer is Jennifer Berkshire and our theme music is by Ryan Shaw. I'm Jack Schneider. Thanks for joining us.