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Review by **Karen Leroux**, Drake University

This article weaves together the complex history of literacy programming sponsored by two United Nations specialized agencies, UNESCO and the World Bank, between World War II and the mid-1970s. Charles Dorn and Kristen Ghodsee contend that literacy instruction became politicized as part of the Cold War struggle between capitalism and communism, while the conception of literacy as a human right seemed to fall out of the development community's conversation. To make this argument, the authors expose several critical shifts in the goals and strategies of these literacy initiatives and illuminate how the influence of the United States contributed to those shifts. The authors succeed in making "seemingly innocuous" programs for literacy instruction into a revealing lens through which to view the trajectory of the Cold War fight against communism (374).

Dorn and Ghodsee contribute to the growing historical scholarship on the politics of international development, post-conflict reconstructions, and nation-building, illustrating that historians of education and international relations have a great deal to offer each other. Nation-building and modern educational projects often intersect in ways which reveal the aspirations of leaders and policymakers to remake societies and foster state loyalty, while calling attention to the political and economic constraints on those aspirations.¹ Illuminating how Cold War policymakers attempted to mobilize literacy

¹ Robert Arnove and Harvey Graff observe that literacy campaigns have often emerged as part of nation-building projects in *National Literacy Campaigns and Movements: Historical and Comparative Perspectives* (New York: Plenum, 1987), 2. More recently, Jeremy Suri has identified education as a central nation-building strategy in *Liberty's Surest Guardian: American Nation-Building from the Founders to Obama* (New York: Free Press, 2011). Recent well-researched examinations of education and nation-building include Noah Sobe, "Educational Reconstruction 'By the Dawn's Early Light': Violent Political Conflict and American Overseas Reform," *Harvard Educational Review* 79 (Spring 2009): 123-131, and the essays in Sobe, ed., *American Post-Conflict Educational Reform: From the Spanish-American War to Iraq* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

programs as politically and economically transformative development tools, this article will serve as a useful resource for historians seeking to investigate the role and impact of education in a range of nation-building and development studies.

The emphasis here is on the constraining political context which spurred impatience with short-term results and produced erratic literacy agendas more concerned with fighting communism than finding effective strategies to teach poor people to read and write. The analysis draws extensively on the sources held at the UNESCO archives in Paris as well as a range of U.S. government archival sources. By framing the educational and institutional politics of literacy within the history of the Cold War, Dorn and Ghodsee significantly sharpen our understanding of how and why these literacy programs did not succeed.²

Prior to 1962 UNESCO officials embarked on a worldwide literacy program with ambitious humanitarian goals clustered around, but not limited to, the eradication of poverty. Its pilot programs in Haiti and Latin America, however, were so egregiously underfunded they did not come close to meeting expectations. The World Bank did not lend money to education before 1962, seeing no way to ensure returns on investment. Yet despite funding problems in carrying out UNESCO's central literacy/anti-poverty mandate, officials expanded programming to community development and human rights initiatives, including advocacy for economic cooperatives, birth control, and interracial marriage. Lacking a record of achievement in literacy and advocating controversial social rights and economic strategies, UNESCO soon became a vulnerable target of investigations by the U.S. State Department and the Central Intelligence Agency, both of which sought evidence of communist influence.

Events in Cuba heightened concerns about the politics of literacy, altering both UNESCO and the World Bank's approaches to education. Fidel Castro's government organized a broad volunteer literacy effort in 1961, which emphasized raising the masses' political consciousness and uniting rural and urban support for the revolution. The Cuban government claimed to have reduced illiteracy from twenty-three to less than four percent in less than one year, achieving results far more impressive than those of UNESCO. The Cuban campaign also attracted keen interest among other developing nations, including Iran, which adapted the Cuban model for its own literacy campaign.

Dorn and Ghodsee show how the success of Cuban 'mass literacy' prompted greater collaboration between UNESCO, the World Bank, and the U.S. State Department, creating a short-lived consensus around 'functional literacy' to promote capitalist economic goals in developing nations in the mid-1960s. New trends in economic theory also informed the shift to functional literacy, but Dorn and Ghodsee's analysis suggests that competing with the mass literacy model was the galvanizing concern. Targeting adults to enhance worker

² Readers seeking detailed accounts of literacy instruction will find the work of Arnove and Graff and the institutionally-focused policy histories of Phillip W. Jones helpful. See Jones, *World Bank Financing of Education: Lending, Learning, and Development* (London: Routledge, 1992), and *The United Nations and Education: Multilateralism, Development, and Globalisation* (London: RoutledgeFalmer, 2005).

productivity and spread free markets, functional literacy represented a significant shift from UNESCO's earlier programming. The authors explain: "Literacy was no longer to be seen as a lauded humanitarian goal, but rather as an investment in human capital that would produce capitalist economic growth" (392). With funding from the World Bank and the U.S.-backed United Nations Development Program, UNESCO unveiled a program of formal secondary and higher education, designed to serve agricultural and industrial development and produce more engineers and professionals in about twenty developing nations.

While functional literacy initially appealed to World Bank officials, Dorn and Ghodsee point out that the World Bank withdrew its support after the former U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara assumed leadership in 1968. McNamara steered the World Bank towards yet another approach to educational programming, with loans going to basic primary and non-formal education, especially in rural areas. This left functional literacy programs underfunded and dependent on U.S. backing at a time when they had yet to produce results and Cuban success was not forgotten. In the altered political context after 1968, however, criticism now came from primarily third-world UNESCO officials who argued that by supporting functional literacy over the Cuban model of mass literacy, previous leaders had allowed UNESCO "to become a tool of the United States and the World Bank" (397). UNESCO's broad humanitarian ambitions for literacy made it vulnerable to accusations of communism in the 1940s and 50s; in the 1970s, its adherence to narrowly economic goals tarred its literacy programming as an instrument of the capitalist West. By the middle of the 1970s, literacy instruction had become so politicized that neither UNESCO nor the World Bank supported either model, and as Dorn and Ghodsee conclude, "the goal of a world campaign against illiteracy became yet one more unfortunate casualty of the Cold War" (398).

Dorn and Ghodsee demonstrate that the path to politicizing literacy programming in developing nations was subject to several contingencies. Neither agency manifested a consistent approach to literacy programming. Readers learn how changes in leadership and funding, as well as shifts in educational and development theories, informed literacy goals and strategies to compete with the mass literacy model. Taking multiple factors and missed opportunities into account, the authors show that neither the move toward functional literacy nor the subsequent directions taken by these U.N. agencies were inevitable. Still, one might wonder what circumstances could have mustered more serious consideration of the mass literacy model among first-world decision makers.

The article leaves readers with a deeper appreciation of how Cold War politics freighted the concept of literacy in developing nations with meanings far beyond the ability to read and write. Dorn and Ghodsee's research should stimulate further study of role given to literacy instruction in the Peace Corps (which does not figure in this article) and other development projects. The politicization of literacy instruction in developing nations also raises questions about U.S. support for literacy instruction domestically. The authors note the irony that Robert McNamara steered World Bank support away from functional literacy instruction shortly after his wife, Margaret McNamara, founded the U.S. domestic literacy initiative, Reading is Fundamental, but they do not further pursue it. Exploring the extent to

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which U.S. support for literacy instruction reached, or failed to reach, across the domestic/foreign policy divide, and how such developments as the Cuban and Iranian literacy campaigns influenced support for literacy instruction at home and abroad, would be a compelling direction for further research.

Karen Leroux is an Associate Professor of history at Drake University. Her research on educational history has appeared in the *History of Education Quarterly* and the *Journal of Women's History*. She is also a contributor to the edited volume, *Teaching America to the World and the World to America: Education and Foreign Relations since 1870*, forthcoming from Palgrave Macmillan.

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