

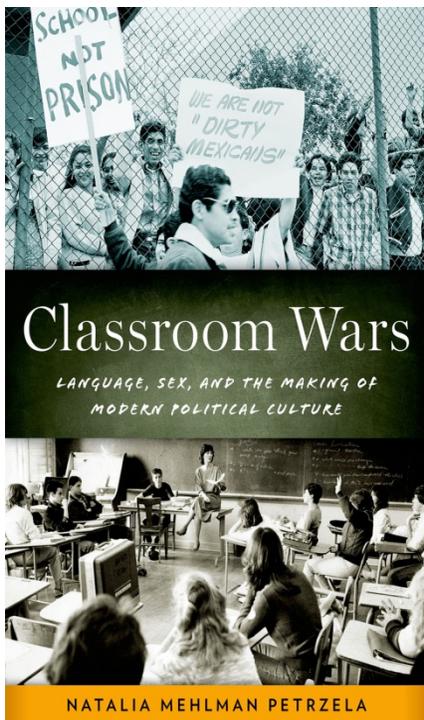
## CLASSROOM WARS

LANGUAGE, SEX, AND THE MAKING OF MODERN POLITICAL  
CULTURE

NATALIA MEHLMAN PETRZELA

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From Cultural Appreciation Days to Gay-Straight Alliances to cafeteria menus featuring "ethnic options," twenty-first century American public schools bear the unmistakable mark of the diversity that has come to define the nation in the last fifty years. At the same time, it is also in public schools where citizens continue to organize most passionately to limit the influence of this heterogeneity on our curricula and classroom culture.



**CLASSROOM WARS** explores how we got here. Focusing in on California's schools during the 1960s and 1970s, Natalia Mehlman Petrzela charts how a state and a citizenry deeply committed to public education as an engine of civic and moral education navigated the massive changes brought about by the 1960s, including the sexual revolution, school desegregation, and a dramatic increase in Latino immigration. In California, where a volatile political culture nurtured both Orange County mega-churches and Berkeley coffeehouses, these changes reverberated especially powerfully. Analyzing two of the era's most innovative, nationally impactful, and never-before juxtaposed programs – Spanish-bilingual and sex education – *Classroom Wars* charts how during a time of extraordinary social change, grass-roots citizens politicized the schoolhouse and family. Many came to link such progressive educational programs not only with threats to the family and nation but also with rising taxes, which they feared were being squandered on morally lax educators teaching ethically questionable curricula.

Using sources ranging from policy documents to personal letters, student newspapers, and oral histories, Petrzela reveals how in 1960s and 70s California – and the nation at large – a growing number of Americans fused values about family, personal, and civic morality, blurring the distinction between public and private and inspiring some of the fiercest classroom wars in American history, controversies that help explain the bitterness of the battles we continue to wage today.

**Natalia Mehlman Petrzela** is Assistant Professor of History at The New School and a former public school teacher.

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## A Q+A with Natalia Mehlman Petrzela

### Why should we care about education debates in California, in particular?

It's funny that to a certain extent, California occupies such a special place in the American imagination - Hollywood! sunshine! hippies! - that it isn't all that hard to justify what could seem like a regional study if say, about Wisconsin or Rhode Island or even Texas. But in this case, there are concrete reasons California's experience tells a story of pressing national relevance:

- The United States' full political spectrum, from liberal Berkeley coffeehouses to conservative Orange County churches, existed in California, and in the 60s and 70s, had to coexist within an exceptionally centralized school system
- The civil rights and sexual revolutions were especially pronounced in California, as was the reaction to them
- A strong uptick in Latino immigration dramatically reshaped the Southwest and California especially. All of these phenomena evolved into major national trends that still resonate strongly today, whether it is in fights about the "Latinization" of America or the permanence of our culture wars.

### Why did you focus on Spanish bilingual education?

It's absolutely right that bilingual education programs have engaged other linguistic groups, and long before the 1960s; the first such programs were actually in the 19th century and engaged German and Czech immigrants. However, in the late 20th century, the struggle for bilingual education was especially urgent for Spanish speakers, who arrived in huge numbers after 1965 and who faced uniquely intense academic challenges: one often-cited statistic was that in the late 1960s, 50% of Latinos in California dropped out of school by the 8th grade. Also, no other linguistic minority has inspired the same kind of frenzy about diluting American culture with its presence.

### Why bring bilingual education and sex education together in one book?

Though they are very different in many ways, ranging from their funding sources to the specific schools in which they were taught, both bilingual and sex education were revolutionary in broadening the school's purpose beyond the "3Rs" and also in recognizing students' varying identities in the schoolhouse, be it different moral systems or different ethnic backgrounds. Also, today both are assumed to be progressive programs, but I actually uncovered that both had deeply conservative aspects as well. Considering them together raises all these questions and also shows how a wide range of educational issues sparked debate in this era, not only desegregation, the overwhelming attention to which can often overshadow these other questions, which are evocative in different ways.

### What will readers find surprising?

A lot, I hope, so here are a few gems:

- Despite the assumption that federal intervention aids liberal educational initiatives, bilingual education shows that in this case it could hamper such progressivism, and that it even fostered bitterness among liberals toward the federal government (an attitude often associated with the Right).
- Even though sex education was often painted as school-based libertinism for introducing topics such as homosexuality in the classroom, the impact was often quite conservative: one student evaluation I read said, "I am SO happy we discussed homosexuality - otherwise we wouldn't know how sick these people are."
- Today we think of bilingual education as just another cause of the Left. Significantly, well into the 1960s there were very vocal conservatives who were major promoters of bilingual education programs for Spanish-speakers. For example, Max Rafferty, the state superintendent and the Republican U.S. Senate candidate in 1968 is best remembered as a kind of proto-Glenn Beck character. Yet in the early 1960s he was arranging educational meetings with the Mexican Minister of Education and publicly saying that Anglo kids had as much responsibility to learn Spanish as Latinos English. As we know, conservatives don't tend to talk like that anymore!

### Who's the most interesting character in *Classroom Wars*?

There are plenty of examples of unknown anecdotes about household names such as Ronald Reagan, but to me the most interesting characters are less known. One is Eugene Gonzales, who was the highest-appointed Latino in the California state bureaucracy in the mid-1960s, appointed by Max Rafferty, a conservative who held up the appointment as an example of his progressive attitudes on race. Gonzales proceeded to handle

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most of California's approach to bilingual education, and constantly walked a fine line between encouraging activism among newly politicized fellow Latinos and quelling the more radical forms of this expression in favor of policies that recognized difference but favored assimilation. He was often berated by radical Chicanos, who saw him as a race traitor even as he was promoting bilingual-bicultural programming that was relatively innovative (they often addressed letters to "*Estimado Eugenio*" though he never used the Hispanicized version of his name in official correspondence). By the 1990s, this tension was gone and Gonzales condemned bilingual education wholeheartedly, supporting Proposition 227. Current histories of this era almost totally overlook Latino conservatives such as Gonzales, and I think stories like his (and he was far from the only one) add a great deal to the historical record and to our understanding of the ethnic dimension of modern political culture.

## **What does *Classroom Wars* tell us about educational policy today?**

*Classroom Wars* helps explain how a commitment to recognizing outsiders in the schoolhouse has become acknowledged across the political spectrum, even as dramatically different solutions arise as to how to address this diversity. Also, if we understand that there exists a longstanding tension between the goals of parents, schools, and children, this book helps show how that plays out, and especially how the family has been racialized - most specifically in that white parents invoking their authority to reject sex education were significantly more impactful than Latino parents demanding that their background be recognized at school. If we think of any educational controversy today - from the fights over yoga to school lunch to the Common Core - we can see how much more is at stake in educational battles than merely the (usually small) curricular question at hand.

## **If you had to say who's winning the battle for American schools, what would you say?**

Well, a main argument of the book is that a persistent contestation continues in American schools, as opposed to the idea that has gained popularity among historians recently that the "Rise of the Right" is the signal development of the late 20th century. Similarly, I don't buy the common refrain on the Right that schools have been taken over completely by some "leftist agenda," a widespread idea for at least the last 50 years. Conservative and liberal intellectual currents have each shaped American schools, and on any given day I could find 20 news clippings that support either side, largely because American education, especially around curriculum, is still quite local, the Common Core notwithstanding. I think we also need to reassess this simplistic liberal/conservative formulation, historically and currently. My book is full of examples that mess up those categories, and a highly relevant example today is what many call the "neoliberal" turn in school reform - one example of which is self-described liberals attacking teachers' unions and celebrating testing regimes, stances that would have surprised (irked?) many 1960s liberals.

## **Is there a personal reason you got interested in these topics?**

Definitely. Working backwards, when I was teaching at a New York City public school, I was struck by how rudimentary the institutional approach to Latino kids was, even in a city with a huge Latino population: there was no differentiation between a Chilean immigrant or a Puerto Rican citizen, and it seemed that little attention was paid to the diverse educational needs and cultural backgrounds of groups that shared little more than speaking (very different) forms of Spanish. Sex education interested me as far back as high school in the 1990s, when I attended the first public high school in the US to have a Gay-Straight Alliance but also which saw major resistance to school-based sex education as part of a bigger, troubling progressive agenda. I could see that all of these educational issues were tied to a society struggling with how to deal with diversity in the schoolhouse, and as someone who has literally spent her entire life (except one year) in school as a student or a teacher, I was inspired to explore these issues in historical context.