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"Pox, Populism and Politics: Three Centuries of American Vaccination Controversies"

Robert Johnston, University of Illinois

Anja Schüler: Hello and welcome to a new episode of our broadcast; my name is Anja Schüler. Colder weather has arrived in the northern hemisphere, and once again the number of COVID-19 infections is on the rise. Yet prospects don't seem quite as bleak this year because many of us have received a vaccine to protect us from a severe case of COVID. Those vaccines have been developed in record time. They have also caused severe controversies, especially about vaccine mandates. But such conflicts did not start during the COVID-19 pandemic; they date back centuries. Today's guest on the HCA podcast explores vaccination controversies of the past. Robert Johnston is a professor of history at the University of Illinois, Chicago, and he is currently working on a book entitled *Pocks, Populism and Politics: Three Centuries of American Vaccination Controversies*. I'm delighted that he's on the show today. Welcome to the HCA podcast.

Robert Johnston: Anja, it's delightful to be here.

Anja Schüler: Looking at the protests against lockdowns and vaccinations on both sides of the Atlantic, we tend to classify them as a right-wing phenomenon. In the United States, for example, we can observe the so-called "red-blue divide" in COVID-19 vaccinations. As of last month, 53% of people in counties that voted for Joe Biden were fully vaccinated, compared to 40% of people Trump counties, and the gap is widening. So today it seems that political progressives tend to get vaccinated and conservatives don't. Has that always been the case?

Robert Johnston: Indeed, in historical perspective, this is new. Vaccine hesitancy, vaccine opposition, vaccine resistance, all slightly different matters we can talk about, have actually transcended political ideological divides in very intriguing and interesting ways. You have very progressive leftist, arguably democratic sources of vaccination resistance, and you have increasingly, in the last fifty years or so, hard-right kinds of resistance to vaccination that we are more familiar with today during the COVID episodes.

Anja Schüler: So we observe anti-vaccination movements, and they mean different things ranging from hesitancy to resistance, really. In the past, we can see them on the left and on the right. What were the roots of such movements in the past?

Robert Johnston: Well, I think the roots are well beyond issues relating to vaccines per se; they relate to a wide variety of concerns about bodily autonomy that really are

part of global history and have played out in all kinds of different ways, in different places. That said, very specifically, the roots of immunization controversies in the Americas have one particular foundational starting point, and that is in 1721, exactly 300 years ago, in Boston. And in that moment, which is, I think, one of the most intriguing episodes in broad vaccination controversies throughout American history, there were assassination attempts, or at least one assassination attempt, plenty of threats to those who were vaccinating, huge concern about Satan being abroad in Boston, with accusations of treason and blasphemy being bandied about on both sides and a genuine threat to the social order, because the people who most wanted to, in this case, inoculate Bostonians, bringing inoculation against smallpox for the first time the Americas were the ministerial elites in Boston, led by Cotton Mather, and people were furious about that.

Anja Schüler: So let's stick with Boston for a minute here. As you said, this was a controversy about smallpox inoculation, so it was an early vaccine that wasn't widely explored at the time.

Robert Johnston: Yes. The word inoculation we hear today quite a lot because people talked about their COVID inoculations or how many people have been inoculated in the red states or the blue states, as you indicated. That term is a matter of art as well as science, and the general term we would use now for immunization is vaccination, coming out of Edward Jenner's naming of his own medical discovery in 1798, that you could use a strain of the Cow Pox virus to provide immunity to smallpox. However, in the eighteenth century in the Americas – this has global roots for sure – inoculation represented the actual introduction of real smallpox into the body, harvesting from smallpox wound or pustule of generally a living smallpox victim, sometimes a dead one, and then introducing that smallpox generally into the arm in a small medical procedure. So technically we need to argue that this is an inoculation controversy in Boston in 1721. But it very much is because it's the same kind of immunization technology and because it has the same kind of characteristics in many ways that we see going forward through the three hundred years; it very much is part of this story.

Anja Schüler: So, if I understood you correctly, the Boston controversy also really went a little bit against the clergy in early eighteenth-century Massachusetts. Now in your book you also look at some other episodes. What are other interesting episodes, vaccination controversies, that we need to know about?

Robert Johnston: So I will say that I'm in the middle of working on my book, so I haven't got all my episodes on the table yet, but I will tell you about some of the most exciting ones that I have been working on, for sure. My research originated actually thirty years ago in the Progressive Era, trying to figure out why, during this time, when modern science and professionalism in all realms of life, business, politics, medicine were so common, why actually there was a very strong anti-vaccinationist movement, which I had never learned about, certainly not in graduate school or the

like. But in fact there was a movement so strong during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century that the leading public health authority figure during that time, Charles Chapin, said that the United States was the least vaccinated country in the industrialized world. And that was because, at the grassroots level, with school boards, with legislatures as well as in terms of just legislative politics that bubbled up throughout the nation, anti-vaccinationists and those who were just concerned about the smallpox vaccine, because that's still what was the main vaccine at hand, were both very strong and able to articulate the concerns to the masses in ways that prevented more than thirty states from having mandatory vaccination laws.

Anja Schüler: Are you referring there to a particular disease that was prevalent at the time? Smallpox again?

Robert Johnston: Smallpox, for sure. There were other vaccines beginning to bubble up against other diseases. But really all of the important politics relating to vaccination at this time were about smallpox. But what was distinctive about the disease at that point and is really intriguing as we look and try to judge both as scholarly historians and then as people trying to find meaning for the present in these controversies, is that there was something that we don't usually associate with smallpox happening. There was a transmutation of the disease from what we call *variola major*. We know *variola major* as the horrible, dreaded smallpox of world history that killed and disfigured on a scale unknown to any other disease in human history. When you see a picture of smallpox, it's the *variola major* that causes all of those horrible pustules and the like. However, during the early twentieth century, for reasons we're not at all sure about, *variola minor* was the dominant strain, and *variola minor* often, most of the time, presented as little more than chickenpox and sometimes not at all. There were no symptoms, as, of course, we know can happen with COVID today, and so not just parents could not necessarily tell that they or their children had smallpox, but their doctors couldn't either. And so when people were trying to figure out whether to get vaccinated, much less whether there should be state mandates about vaccination, which is a very different issue, they were saying, hey, this is the smallpox thing. It's not that big a deal, which seems very strange for us. How can you say smallpox is not a big deal, but it actually was true. And at the same time the vaccinations for smallpox were crude enough at the time and had a variety of impurities in them that you could see little like if your neighbor's baby broke out with horrible pustules because of the vaccination. So those were the matters of judgment that people, reasonably at the time, were trying to make in the early twentieth century.

Anja Schüler: Reason is a pretty good cue for us here, because today we consider vaccination opponents rather as a fringe movement. Was that the case in the past? Who was, can you maybe pinpoint that down, who was opposed to vaccination and why? You already mentioned a few reasons, but who are the actors here?

Robert Johnston: So they're named, and they have vivid biographical histories, and sometimes they were at the fringe of politics, and sometimes they weren't, and

sometimes, as we know, the fringe can be very connected to the main stream, and that's particularly what I'm interested in. So perhaps in a moment we can talk about some of the really kind of lunatic fringe characters of the early Cold War period, whom I'm particularly interested in, but sticking with the Progressive Era of the early twentieth century just a little bit longer, since we both care deeply about that period if only for that reason. One person I have been particularly interested in for a long time is a woman named Lora Little, and she was arguably the most prominent anti-vaccinationist in the early twentieth century nationally. She had a very visible national presence in her circles, and at the same time she was very deeply rooted in a variety of localities in Oregon for much of the early twentieth century, which is what my first book is about and where I discovered her. And Lora Little, among other things, led a revolt against mandatory vaccination in schools in various neighborhoods in Portland during the 1914 that was successful. The authorities wanted to require vaccination against smallpox during a so-called minor epidemic. There was a contest indeed about whether it was an epidemic or not, how serious the disease has to be to be declared a public health emergency. But she mobilized parents effectively enough that the school authorities stood down and let people who were unvaccinated into the schools. That was one episode in 1914. In 1916, she led an initiative because Oregon had the instruments of direct democracy that would have banned compulsory vaccination at any level in the state. And that initiative passed in Portland very robustly and came within 374 votes of passing statewide, in a way that we can't think. How could the masses actually have tried to ban compulsory vaccination? But Lora Little, for a variety of reasons, was able to effectively mobilize a rhetoric of liberty and democracy. But most tellingly, and what I think is so contrary to many of the ways we view anti-vaccinationists, is her involvement in a referendum in 1913. And that referendum involved having the populace vote on whether or not a particular state law that had just been passed in the legislature, whether that should stand. And that piece of legislation was one of the many eugenic sterilization laws of that time. Over the course of the early twentieth century, thirty states passed laws that allowed for different levels of the government to involuntarily sterilize so-called imbeciles, so-called morons, these horrible, ugly words that were used at the time, to try to indicate people who supposedly were of abnormally low intelligence or who had poor morals, and in this case Oregon had one of the early laws in 1913, and Lora Little thought it was a barbaric and tyrannical law that violated basic human-rights and bodily autonomy. And in retrospect, as our current judgments go, I think rightly, we would agree with her that it was a gross violation of human-rights, so for the first time, and as far as I can tell, the only time in America, and perhaps world history, the people actually voted on eugenic sterilization and because of Lora Little, this anti-vaccinationist, they voted it down, they got the law stripped from the books, and though anti-vaccinationists were not complete democratic, libertarian heroes throughout American history by any means – we'll perhaps turn to that next – but in this case they struck a major blow for liberty.

Anja Schüler: So, as you just said, vaccination opponents are not necessarily on the political fringes historically, and they have managed to unite people behind political causes, connected or not connected to vaccination. So which social and political movements, maybe let's talk a little more about that, which social and political movements did they align with, other than the populism that you mentioned in the title of your book?

Robert Johnston: Indeed, a surprisingly wide variety of movements, and I think that's one of the intriguing parts of figuring this out in terms of scholarly causation, like how did vaccine movements bubble up? Was it just about concerns about the body or disease, or in fact, did it represent broader sensibilities, about what democracy should look like, what grassroots politics should look like, and so on. And, as you might imagine, I'm very sympathetic to the latter. And in this case, as we go through the twentieth century, you can see intention for sure, sometimes in contradiction, but a set of vaccine policies that in many ways brought left and right together, that both the left and the right, perhaps crude terms that might even be overly broad but still, I think, seem to work, have very strong, libertarian strains, have very strong, you might say individualist strains, very strong suspicion of the state, and those can blend in very easily. When you say a leftist would be concerned about a suppression of freedom of speech, and anti vaccinationists were very concerned about having their own organs shut down or legally denigrated or their proponents even jailed, in the same way that rightwing people could be concerned about a tyrannical communist centralized state and also one that was so profoundly Leviathan-like that it was going to the micro level and even trying to manage people's own bodily decisions about how they would treat themselves and their children. And, if you like, I can perhaps narrate a bit about that right-wing connection.

Anja Schüler: Sure.

Robert Johnston: As much as I like to think of myself as a left-wing radical, democratic populist person, I'm intrigued by how much those vaccination opponents in the past have actually surprisingly mirrored some of that same kind of hopeful politics, inclusive politics, that what I call "inclusive populism." That is certainly not always the case and there is a very significant strain, starting in the 1940s and 1950s, that you could say have a fairly direct connection between the Cold War, paranoid anti-communism strains in American politics and January 6th and the kind of, I think it is fair to say, facism that you see during that period. And this is important not just in terms of present-day viewpoints but because, in fact, January 6th, there were outright anti-vaccinationists involved in the insurrection and the political movements around the "big steal," the "big lie," you know, the idea that the [2020 presidential] election was supposedly stolen. Very much the same anti-vaccinationists have been involved in those kinds of movements in the current day. So where does that come from? It's important for us to know that the connections come from a very long line of deep right-wing conspiratorial kind of thinking, which is not to say the left-wingers can't engage in conspiratorial thinking at all. Or in fact, as I like to tell my students, the

most prominent conspiracy theorists in American history were the American founding fathers and anti-slavery advocates, right? So conspiracy thinking itself is not necessarily moving to right-wing fascism. However, in the case of the 1940s and 1950s, when the polio vaccine came onto the scene, there was a very what I might forthrightly call toxic brew of anti-communism veering toward outright racism and antisemitism and anti-vaccination movements.

Anja Schüler: So you would say that anti-vaccination proponents were connected to a rather broad movement, or would that be also more the lunatic fringe of the Cold War that you mentioned earlier?

Robert Johnston: Still difficult to tell, and I'm still trying to figure that out. What I have are two quotations that I found, not because I have done a good, thorough reading of the Better Business Bureau newsletter of the 1950s, but because it was in the archive of the American Medical Association, whose historical health fraud and alternative medicine collection is an amazing resource for scholars to try to find these people who really were in many ways off the mainstream radar screen. We don't have a lot of good archival records, we don't have a lot of good public periodical records for them, but the AMA basically spied on these groups from the early twentieth century, all kinds of people who were anti-vaccinationists or opposed organized medicines such as chiropractors. And so the archive we have of those is astounding. One quotation I have from the Better Business Bureau says that, in fact in these words, we must not discount the opponents of polio vaccination. And again we think everybody loved polio vaccination; it saved children and who could have not liked it. But this quotation from Alan Backman, who was one of the leaders of the Better Business Bureau, said this is not just the lunatic fringe. It's clearly well enough organized that in many localities, in many states it is very much preventing uptake of the polio vaccination in ways that deeply concern us and in fact is really appealing, especially to mothers, because of course the pro-vaccine people were very much appealing to parents, especially to mothers to protect their children. But anti-vaccionationists could play that card as well.

Anja Schüler: That's an interesting aspect that you mentioned, because also there was a recent article in the *New York Times* about mothers who are really opposed to giving the COVID vaccine to babies. Is that also something we can observe in history, mothers in particular, who are opposed to vaccinating their babies. If that is so – why?

Robert Johnston: Very much, there's a very strong continuity here. Though I don't see that yet in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. There're issues mainly related to what the limits of state mandates over bodies were generally, matters of liberty and democracy. However, again, looking at Lora Little, she herself dated her coming into the anti-vaccination movement, which was an active, organized movement, when her five-year old son Kenneth died. And to her view that was because of smallpox vaccination, and at that point she turned quite virulently against not just the vaccination of the time but against state medicine generally. And she consistently

appealed to mothers, to her own experience of having lost a child, to her own experience of how mothers were necessary to create a population of people who took control over their own destiny through good food and through good morals. And you see that very much coming up even in the 1960s and 1970s in feminist movements. Certainly inflected differently, because it was a rhetoric very much of women's empowerment that was more modern than, say, Lora Little's kind of materialism. But here I would very much want to credit Elena Conis' book *Vaccine Nation*, which does a wonderful job exploring these issues. But feminists in the 1960s and 1970s were very much involved, I mean, some feminists were involved in resistance to vaccinations because they felt it was part of the overall tyrannical medical industrial complex that victimized women in matters ranging from childbirth to lactation, breast cancer, and they felt that it was part of the same realm there as well.

Anja Schüler: So we're thinking along the lines of *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, of some sort of bodily autonomy. Well, those are some pretty profound ideas here that you have given us about anti-vaccination movements of the past, and as historians, we ask ourselves: How does this speak to us today? How can we use it now during the controversies about the COVID vaccine?

Robert Johnston: So I would say in a few different ways. The first is that actually we should honor the history in ways that I would hope that we would honor history generally, and that is that these issues are complex, and that as you go on a TV show, you try to write an op-ed, and you say something is complex that's going to put people to sleep. However, it's still incredibly important for us to see that not all resistance to vaccinations is the same, that there was a wide variety and diversity of movements, and that we shouldn't tar; I mean it could be a very grave mistake to tar today's movements with the same brush that everything has always been the same, right? It's important to differentiate people, differentiate ideas. Another way we can tell, really connect past and present, is in fact to argue that some concerns about vaccines have been valid in the past, and even if you don't want to go that far that they have been strong and significant enough in the American past that they're not just going to go away through what I call a "politics of condemnation." Like "you bad people, you're not getting your vaccines, you're killing us, you're destroying democracy." You know, that's very rarely going to appeal to somebody who is already in that realm in the first place, and it's not representing really the genuine history of some democratic and libertarian qualities of vaccine resistance movements facing dissident movements. So, I think, in an age where we don't like to talk to each other, when politics are so polarized that it does mean that, as difficult as it is, we need to keep trying very, very hard to talk to one another as much as we disagree, as much as we even may think that you're involved in kind of toxically murderous politics. Some people you can't talk to, but trying to expand the number that you can is critical.

Anja Schüler: And I would say it's certainly our job as historians to explore and also disentangle history, which is almost always complex because political movements and

people are not as neat as we would like them to be. You are listening to the HCA podcast, and I have been talking to Robert Johnston from the University of Illinois, Chicago. He is working on a book entitled *Pox, Populism and Politics: Three Centuries of American Vaccination Controversies*, and I understand that's under contract with Oxford University Press. We are certainly looking forward to it, so thank you so much for your insights, Robert.

Robert Johnston: All right, thank you. As always it's really delightful to talk to you.

Anja Schüler: And this concludes today's episode of Quo Vadis, USA? Our broadcast is produced at the University of Heidelberg with support from the Jacob Gould Schurman Foundation. As always, I would like to thank Julian Kramer for technical support and Thomas Steinbrunner for our audio logo, and I would like to thank you for listening. We will be back in two weeks with a new episode, so stay tuned and please stay healthy.