

Book Review

A Review of Cristina Viviana Groeger's *The Education Trap: Schools and the Remaking of Inequality in Boston*

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**Reviewed
by Neil Dhingra**

In *The Education Trap: Schools and the Remaking of Inequality in Boston*, Christina Viviana Groeger (2021) brilliantly presents a detailed historical argument that education facilitates social mobility for some while closing doors on others. Groeger argues that, if policymakers envision investment in human capital as the means of shared prosperity, they must consider that education transfers power from some interest groups, like craftworkers, to others, such as low-wage operatives. Furthermore, Groeger notes the difficulty of disentangling cognitive and instrumental resources from propriety and sociability—for instance, the “right” English accent. Groeger concludes, “This book challenges us to reinterpret ‘merit’ as a culturally constructed set of knowledges, behaviors, and values that reflect historically specific personal preferences and prejudices, often used by elites to maintain their power” (p. 10). Groeger raises the important question, especially but not only for professors of educational foundations, of whether education can be distinguished from the institutionalization of privilege by occupational groups and the definitional power of elite gatekeepers (see Mijs, 2020).

Groeger first takes the reader to 19th century Boston, where occupations and educational credentials were loosely coupled. In this self-consciously networked world, low-wage workers depended on ethnic solidarity and only aspired to education. While craftworkers followed their fathers into craft union apprenticeships, they rarely accessed the hallways of public high schools past the age of 15 or 16, and proprietors

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preferred learning on the job to learning Latin. One could enter a learned profession like law without formal training but with those personal contacts necessary for the recommendation to get an apprenticeship with a practicing attorney. Colleges remained for Boston's Brahmin elite. In the hierarchical world, human capital was largely comprised of social capital, and African Americans remained unfairly disadvantaged by the racist boundaries of social networks. As the Black Boston doctor and lawyer John S. Rock (1862) wrote in *The Liberator*, "The more highly educated the colored man is, the more keenly he suffers." He would have no "field for his talent" (Foner & Lewis, 1978, p. 269).

Groeger then discusses how educators, intellectuals, and employers envisioned education as elevating the impoverished through self-improvement that would also raise the status of their work into "professions." Their most successful reform—there were unsuccessful reforms—was the public day school. However, Groeger notes that employers suggested public schools culturally form their students against not only "vicious and exciting amusements" (p. 89) (meaning sex) but also the apparent deficits of their immigrant families. As for African American students, the public schools remained unwelcoming. For example, in 1903, a student informed a newspaper that her textbook described African Americans as "slaves and n-----" (p. 92). Further, no amount of education could persuade many employers to hire African American Bostonians.

Employers themselves self-interestedly turned to industrial education as an alternative to craft union control of apprenticeships. Groeger cites an article in the *Bulletin of the National Metal Trades Association* which argued that trade schools avoided the "poisonous" atmosphere of union rules to "teach a boy, not only the art of molding, but also good morals, and the art of the 'open shop'" (p. 109). During the 1919 Boston Police Strike, students at one private trade school, Wentworth Institute, joined Harvard students as strikebreakers. A Germanic system of standardized industrial education, which presupposed unions and employers discerning a common good, never took root in Boston. Eventually, public schools were tasked with not only academics but also inculcating safely acceptable politics for the future machine operators who increasingly took the place of craftworkers.

White collar workers turned not to unions but to professional associations that maintained barriers to entry and offered social and cultural benefits to members only. These workers often graduated from the deluge of new commercial and business schools—40 new institutions in Boston between 1890 and 1920. Groeger notes that these institutions not only taught typing but often "promoted a human capital understanding of education" and "an individualist notion of market success" (p. 157). Their varying quality spurred the development of public alternatives.

Still, from the public high school curriculum, students learned to write and speak and calculate—and “office etiquette” (p. 173). This “etiquette” affected would-be telephone operators, for whom foreign accents were disqualifying. So-called pink-collar education could also tighten existing networks. For example, the operators for the New England Telephone Company (NETC) were Irish Catholics, and the NETC abstained from ads that drew “foreigners, illiterate, and untidy” (p. 175). The NETC rejected Jewish applicants until the 1940s. Here, “talent” remained context-specific, bound up with ethnicity, and hardly neutral at all.

As for teachers, Boston’s school superintendent from 1880 to 1904, Edwin Seaver, argued the public schools required the “best teachers” who were “outsiders” and likely female Protestant private college graduates (p. 186). Also, Seaver wanted a less feminized profession. Contrarily, Julia Harrington Duff, a teacher and graduate of the Boston Normal School, argued for “Boston schools for Boston girls,” and, Groeger recounts, managed to get Seaver replaced. Duff also wanted the Boston Normal School to become a degree-granting institution; Harvard leaders (and others) wanted professional training for teachers under private university auspices. Unsuccessfully, Duff argued that her opponents were prejudiced against Irish women and reflected a perennial conflict between patricians and the plebeian women of the city. The Boston Normal School only belatedly gained the right to award bachelor’s degrees in education in 1922.

The educational anxiety about gender existed beyond Boston’s public schools. At Harvard, the dean of the Division of Education believed that the school’s reputation was proportional to its male enrollment and converted the Division of Education to the Harvard Graduate School of Education (HGSE), temporarily offering only graduate degrees and eliminating nearly all female students. The men of the HGSE trained male education administrators and experts who, armed with measurements and mental testing, led a mostly female teaching force. As one (female) normal school graduate satirically lamented, “Efficiency takes hold of me” (p. 203).

In law, Harvard Law School, with its “scientific” curriculum based on the case method and full-time professors, looked different from part-time evening law schools staffed by entrepreneurial practitioners and whose pedagogy could resemble the Baltimore Catechism (Rustad & Koenig, 1990). This may have reflected a reasonable differentiation in legal practice between future corporate attorneys and prospective court advocates, often with solo or joint partnerships. However, Harvard’s graduates also tended to be White, male, Protestant, and upper-class. Further, Harvard, with Boston’s other law schools, the local and state bar associations, and the state board of education, sought to prevent the prominent evening Suffolk Law School from gaining degree-granting power. Thus, any ad-

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vancement via legal education could remain subject to institutionalized forms of social closure limiting entry to the profession.

Old hierarchies persisted in professional schools and undergraduate colleges, which became gateways to corporate hierarchies, which then became gateways to college administration posts in a revolving door of various forms of racial and gendered and familial privilege. “Merit” remained entangled with what Groeger calls “criteria beyond academics” (p. 233). Procter & Gamble had a job placement for a salesman of the “dominant type” with an “impressive appearance” (ibid.), and another that explicitly said, “Christians preferred” (p. 236). In 1941, a Harvard placement officer assured AT&T about a prospective statistician, “although Bernstone is Jewish, he is one of the most popular men in the department” (p. 237). College were places where men and women were sent on different tracks, except, of course, when they engaged in assortative mating, which then intergenerationally passed down capital (see Mijs, 2020).

Groeger concludes by suggesting that educational meritocracy cements the power of the elite and recommends industrial unions and “mass organizing of workers across skill level, gender, and race” (p. 256). But did industrial unions necessarily cross racial lines, as competition could exist within unions for promotions, seniority rights, and safer jobs, and foster racialized forms of privilege (see Hill, 1996)? A second question can be asked. Is “merit” only a “culturally constructed set of knowledges, behavior, and values” (p. 10), so that social construction rules out objectivity? Of course, “returns to education in the marketplace reflect not only skills but also power” (p. 7), but many of Groeger’s subjects make arguments that depend on some observable objectivity in “merit,” even if this went unrecognized by their opponents.

First, the article in the *Bulletin of the National Metal Trades Association* against union rules and for an “open shop” may be propagandistic but presents an argument that craft unions both fostered predatory economic practices against apprentices and constricted apprenticeships. The author appeals to evidence—“a student of sociology at Columbus University” confirms that boys unfairly denied apprenticeships became loafers in slums, and he claims, “I am telling what the lithographers tell me,” about how work was “suffering” because of the apprentice shortage (Ketcham, 1904, p. 550). Further, the author describes an alternative model of solidarity: a boy gets a subsidized education at the Winona Technical Institute and then pays for another boy; the gift is self-consciously circulated. Thus, the author argues the current practices of craft unions lead to disastrous market failures and that education need not lead to an efficiency-equality tradeoff.

Second, Groeger describes Dorothy M. O’Brien’s Normal School oration (1917) against expertise as “resentment” of the “power” (p. 203) of

administrative experts, but O'Brien also cleverly presents an argument. The conclusion of the experts' "love" for "graphs and figures" is that teachers will neither "heed the call of the 'fountain of youth' on Tremont Street" nor recognize a "real meal." Teachers will become machine-like, or, more likely, never last. "I am not long for this sphere," O'Brien says, half in jest, at the very least making a pointed argument about teacher satisfaction and retention. Implicitly, Groeger makes an argument that may be both deeply moral and intelligible within a human capital framework: these experts can neither develop nor retain talent.

Finally, the founder of Suffolk Law School, Gleason Archer, wrote *The Educational Octopus* (1915), which notes his initial fear of the testimony of Harvard's President Lowell against Suffolk—"what chance had my little school in the unequal contest"—and his realization that "[Lowell's] arguments were very weak; that he contradicted himself and seemed to be feeling his way along..." (p. 176). As Groeger recounts, Lowell had to acknowledge that if Suffolk could prove quality, it deserved degree-granting status. What Archer wants of legislators is "free unbiased judgment"; when he talks to the Governor, who ends up secretly betraying him just after Good Friday, Archer says, "Every objection that he raised I answered fully until he dismissed it as of no further concern to him" (p. 215, 243). To Archer, the "aristocrats" of Harvard feared fair competition—"self-made men with a native wit that surpasses any university education as an equipment for practice" (p. 278), and open debate that would expose both the institutionalization of privilege by occupational groups and the definitional power of elite gatekeepers to rational scrutiny.

These arguments may be incorrect. (Against Archer, one might cite Elihu Root's [1916] contemporaneous claim that badly trained lawyers were causing courts "double time and labor" with "worthless dispute," "useless evidence," "superfluous motions," and a general lack of public spirit [p. 189]). Nevertheless, they may describe the presence of craft union rules that damage work, expert-driven slogans like "efficiency" that damage teachers, and educational octopuses who secretively damage new and innovative law schools catering to marginalized populations. Hypothetically, if bad forms of privilege and definitional power, often supported by political and bureaucratic discretion, were to lose influence, something like trade school solidarity among new tradesmen, or renewable and recognizably human teachers, or even "self-made men [and women] with a native wit" might flourish in their absence.

This raises the question of whether, while recognizing that "merit" is always shaped, enabled, and thwarted by institutional forces (and must never be uncritically celebrated), we can ever evaluate its distortions. Education seems entangled with rent-seeking—the ability to secure economic benefits through policy, such as by limiting entry to professions

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through licensure and other forms of occupational closure. Reason and persuasion may (or may not) have purchase here through identifying social loss resulting from the unproductive use of resources. If they do not, the solution may indeed be something like Groeger's call for the mass organizing of workers in large industrial unions which collectively eliminate contestability in a manner analogous to Hobbes' Leviathan by creating an economic authority beyond the possibility of influence (Hillman, 2010).

This thorny question reveals how Groeger's book is essential for education foundations courses. These courses are meant to create an important democratic space for critical, alternative views amidst a status quo increasingly marked by the individualist, free-market ideology of neoliberalism and neoconservative American exceptionalism (Atkinson, 2020). At the same time, the danger exists that these courses foster an antihegemonic hegemony, a supranormative position of political critique that never criticizes itself. Educational foundations classes should create "moments of doubt" about all our roles and responsibilities (Sarofian-Butin, 2020, p.4). For future teachers, Groeger's book creates valuable classroom "moments of doubt" about not only Procter & Gamble but also public schools, unions, schools of education, and Harvard itself.

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