

No, Education Still Won't Solve Poverty

AN INTERVIEW WITH

CRISTINA GROEGER

For more than a century, one of the most persistent ideas in US politics has been that education is the best solution to inequality. But it's not persistent because it's true — it's persistent because it's a useful myth for political and economic elites jealously guarding their money and power.

INTERVIEW BY

MIKE STIVERS

Since the mid-1800s, the number of children attending school in the United States has steadily increased. Economic equality has not. Yet the idea that schooling is the best way to reduce poverty and close the gap between rich and poor goes almost unquestioned. In her new book, *The Education Trap*, historian Cristina Groeger addresses this myth head on.

Using Boston as a case study, and focusing her lens on the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Groeger examines the relationship between schools and inequality at a time when public education was expanding rapidly. On the whole, the evidence is clear: the massive growth of public education did not produce broad-based economic prosperity. Schools did train some workers who found higher-wage jobs in the expanding corporate bureaucracy. But by undercutting powerful craft unions and establishing a credentialing system, schools also solidified existing stratification.

Groeger's book shows the checkered history of education as an anti-poverty tool. Perhaps most importantly, it helps educators and organizers think about the things that actually do reduce inequality: universal government programs and strong unions.

Jacobin contributor Mike Stivers spoke with Groeger, a historian at Lake Forest College, about her new book and what education can and can't do in an unequal society.

MIKE STIVERS The basic idea you address in your book is that education is a policy solution to inequality. What is the theory that underpins this idea?

CRISTINA GROEGER There is a long history of viewing education as a solution to inequality that goes back to Horace Mann in the mid-nineteenth century, who calls education "the great equalizer." But in more contemporary policy debates, the dominant framework is human capital theory, which comes out of economics. It sees compensation in the labor market as a reflection of one's skill level, usually measured in terms of education and training.

The argument of economists like Claudia Goldin and Lawrence Katz is that in recent decades, technological change that favors very highly skilled workers has been advancing and educational enrollment has not been keeping up, which therefore means that a limited number of people can access the highest paying jobs. And, so, the solution to addressing social inequality today is more access to education.

There's a lot of evidence that education level does not automatically translate into higher wages. But the relationship between education and inequality is also more complicated. Compared to other countries, the United States has long had one of the highest rates of educational access and enrollment in the world — and yet, it also has one of the highest rates of inequality. That presents a paradox if we think education is the best tool to reduce inequality.

An early predecessor of the human capital model can be seen in the progressive reformers of the early twentieth century, who thought the reason low-wage workers are paid low wages is because they lack skill. So if you can train domestic workers in schools of housekeeping, that will not just raise wages but transform the occupation into something more like a profession.

The problem was that many domestic workers and other low-wage workers didn't have time to go to these schools. It also ignored the reasons that many African Americans were stuck in low-wage positions: not because they didn't have enough skills or because of their education level, but because of racism in the labor market or other kinds of inequalities that structure the labor market.

MIKE STIVERS Your book begins in the Gilded Age, when Boston and many other big cities in the United States decided to invest massively in public education. Why did expanding public schools become the big-ticket reform item, as opposed to other options on the table?

CRISTINA GROEGER There was a wide coalition of support for public education. Progressive reformers thought that education was the best way to lift low-wage workers out of poverty and Americanize immigrants. For employers, public education was an attractive solution to reduce their training costs — they could offload that onto the school system — and it also took pressure off them to improve working conditions or raise wages.

But I also argue that there was a huge amount of working-class support for public education, especially for education that could provide training for the booming sector of white-collar jobs: clerks, secretaries, typists, accountants.

This is the one sector of work where the human capital model does work pretty well to describe the dynamics. A lot of students, mostly white women and second-generation immigrants, used schools, especially public high schools, to enter new kinds of white-collar jobs. And this was a material basis for the ideology of education as a means of social mobility, even though it only describes a specific set of students going into a specific sector of work in this historical time.

MIKE STIVERS Some on the Left would say that by preparing the future workforce, public schools subsidized job training for private businesses. The alternative, they argue, would be training workers at the expense of the corporation — something like on-the-job training. But this was exactly what many employers tried to do in the early twentieth century, and unions at the time were fiercely opposed to it. Why was that?

CRISTINA GROEGER There were almost no unions in white-collar work at this time and basically no opposition to expanding training. Craftwork and the industrial sector were a different story. Craft workers had organized power in the form of craft unions, and that power came from their ability to control access to specific skills through the union apprenticeship process. Employers of craft workers were very eager to get around the craft unions and the apprenticeship process, both because it regulated the wages they had to pay apprentices and because employers don't like unions and wanted to undercut the basis of their power.



Students at Roxbury High School in Boston, Massachusetts, c. 1893. (A. H. Folsom / Boston Public Library)

Craft workers were pretty effective in shutting down private trade schools and shifting the curriculum away from specific craft skills in public industrial education. The building trades are still one of the few places where apprenticeship exists, and that's because craft unions didn't let control of the training process go outside, into the school system.

MIKE STIVERS You also note that it wasn't as if employers were graciously providing the training free of charge. A whole new class of private schools sprung up to provide the training at a cost. This seems similar to what we would now call for-profit schools.

CRISTINA GROEGER Yeah, this again depends on the sector. There were some private trade schools, often with a relationship to employers. But the real growth of the for-profit sector of the early twentieth century was in white-collar work, where schools could offer training with little opposition in work with no organized worker power.

These business colleges, or commercial colleges, became a large share of the educational landscape until public high schools displaced them.

MIKE STIVERS By the time public schools became sites of job training, after years of struggle between unions and employers, employers were more interested in those schools teaching basic literacy and numeracy. Employers didn't want schools teaching trade skills, and, say, carpentry or machinery. Why was that?

CRISTINA GROEGER I argue in the book that we can think about the rise of mass production, especially around World War I, in part as a strategy that is intended to reduce the number of craft workers overall and shift the entire workforce to new types of work where they have less power.

These are also workers that get most of their training not on the job but in schools. That includes immigrant machine operatives that have some basic literacy and numeracy that they might get in primary education, but otherwise can be trained very quickly on the job. It includes this new white-collar workforce, mostly high-school educated students that are staffing the bureaucracies that accompany big mass production industries. And schools are also training a very small number of college-educated managers and engineers at the top.

So what we see is that employers are able to rely on different types of schools for different segments of their labor force, but by the 1920s or 1930s, it's also a labor force that is overwhelmingly nonunionized and has less power than its counterparts in previous types of craft work.

MIKE STIVERS Right. And you note that this rise of a supervisory class — you talk a lot about high-level, highly educated engineers — is closely connected to Taylorism and the systematic deskilling of the workforce.

CRISTINA GROEGER We can see these as two sides of the same coin. As employers shift to an industrial model of mass production that depends on assembly-line workers at the bottom and a new pink-collar workforce that's largely feminized, we see a mass group of workers that have very little power and a new managerial class at the top.

This workforce is much cheaper. Women that do these jobs are paid often half of what men are, and it's a workforce with essentially no unions, no organized power. And as the white-collar workforce expands, it goes from being a pretty exclusive and prestigious type of merchant's apprenticeship, to what we would now call pink-collar work.

MIKE STIVERS You also show that African Americans had some of the highest levels of educational attainment and yet were consistently at the lowest rungs of the wage scale.

CRISTINA GROEGER Yeah, I wasn't expecting to find this, but if we compare the children of working-class kids and their enrollment, African Americans consistently had higher levels of educational enrollment than both white native-born students and white immigrant students. And yet they were consistently pushed into the lowest-paid positions.

This is the clearest example of human capital theory's failure to make sense of compensation in the labor market. African Americans were almost completely excluded from clerical work, even though they were attending high schools.

MIKE STIVERS Many people in the US today think of a college degree as a passport to wealth and income, but you show that historically, the introduction of high school and college degrees has cemented inequality just as much as it's reduced it. How did this happen?

CRISTINA GROEGER As high school becomes a mass institution in this period, and as new populations — immigrants, women — are entering white-collar jobs, we see a strong reaction among Boston's economic and professional elite. They forge relationships with private universities to turn a college degree into an important credential for the highest-paying jobs in the new corporate economy — whereas in the nineteenth century most owners of businesses and managers had not gotten a college

degree, maybe not even a high school degree. We can also see this in other high-paying professions, like the development of corporate law.

In the book, I look at the correspondence between employers and university placement officers, who are helping college graduates get jobs. This is a great source to see why employers prefer college graduates. I find that some of their discussion has to do with skill, or human capital, but a lot of it has to do with employer preferences about race or class or other personal characteristics.

So this means that elite universities are able to reproduce the traditional elite in these new corporate positions, but now elites have the cover of a merit-based credential to legitimize their position in the economy.

MIKE STIVERS Despite its poor record of reducing inequality, the idea that education is a policy solution to inequality is still everywhere. Why is education such an attractive policy solution to economic problems?

CRISTINA GROEGER I think part of the reason is because many promoters of education can imagine education doing so many different things. We see this in the early twentieth century as well. There's a huge coalition of supporters, often with opposite interests in other realms, coming together around the idea of education.

The idea also persists because it does not challenge some of the most powerful actors in the economy. It doesn't challenge the power of employers to pay whatever wages they want, or to create whatever working conditions they want.

It's very easy to talk about lofty ideals and goals within the educational system, but there are limits to how much it can do on its own. And it can often obscure labor market inequalities that are much more important in shaping the social inequalities that we saw in the early twentieth century and we're seeing again today.

MIKE STIVERS Many on the Left object to schools being simply a site for job training, but job preparation also remains an essential part of public education's purpose. How should socialists conceive of school's purpose in the twenty-first century?

CRISTINA GROEGER To the extent that education does matter for accessing jobs — and on an individual level, of course, education matters — I don't think we should denigrate students for pursuing education for that reason. There's a tendency to dismiss the careerism, or the vocationalism of students, which I think essentially blames students for the economy they face.

If those on the Left want to free up education for other creative or emancipatory pursuits, we first need to create an economy that provides everyone with a livelihood. The demands for free college and debt-free college are good socialist demands, but they're not enough. We've seen how elites can always create new barriers using even higher credentials.

This gets to the title of the book, "The Education Trap." Across the political spectrum, schools are seen as the solution to so many social problems, but a focus on schools can be convenient to those with the most economic power, because it shifts the burden of reform onto students, onto teachers, and away from what is the real source of inequality: the lack of power workers have in the economy and in politics.

Educators do have an important role to play in the struggle for worker power. We've seen that in Chicago, where I'm based. Teachers' unions have been fighting not only for their own working conditions but for a broad political agenda and for public investment in their students and in their communities.

And I think, as socialists, if we interpret the role of schools broadly, we should see these kinds of organizing campaigns as really important forms of political education as well. We should be promoting those both within and outside of schools.

CONTRIBUTORS

Cristina Groeger is a history professor at Lake Forest College and the author of *The Education Trap: Schools and the Remaking of Inequality in Boston*.

FILED UNDER

United States

Inequality / Education / History

Higher Education / Class Mobility / Elites