



The education trap: schools and the remaking of inequality in Boston

by Cristina Viviana Groeger, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2021, 384 pp., US\$35.00 (hardback), ISBN 9780674249110

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BOOK REVIEWS

The education trap: schools and the remaking of inequality in Boston, by Cristina Viviana Groeger, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2021, 384 pp., US\$35.00 (hardback), ISBN 9780674249110

In *The Education Trap*, Cristina Viviana Groeger examines the ways education was used for economic progress in the city of Boston throughout the late 19th and early 20th centuries. At the same time, Groeger's analysis calls us to question the role of education in shaping inequality. Indeed, this book places the very purpose of education in doubt, particularly amidst an increasingly racially and ethnically diverse city and nation. More specifically, Groeger's book uses qualitative data, along with a rich IPUMS historical dataset, to present a convincing challenge to the long-held notion that education is the key to social mobility and equality. By highlighting some of the individuals and social networks that were deeply invested in limiting social mobility, Groeger presents a compelling argument of the ways education, often revered as the path to opportunity, has been used and misused to maintain and reproduce inequality.

Over the course of eight chapters, Groeger tells an intriguing story of how highly influential and exclusive networks used their power to dictate educational opportunity and outcomes. In this case, Boston's elite maintained the status quo by deciding who gets what jobs, who has a right to what type of education and consequently, who has access to the highest social positions. The Boston Brahmins, for example, were wealthy and highly educated members of Boston's society. They used their elitist power to restrict immigration and claimed immigrants, women, and people of color were inferior and unqualified for formal education. Groeger also illustrates that when the demand for higher education grew, professionals used existing structures to exclude groups of people under the guise of meritocracy. This *Education Trap* suggests that some populations are just not 'college material' and would never reach elite social status.

Throughout the book, Groeger highlights the ways the Boston Brahmins dictated how, when, and by whom, education would be used. Groeger demonstrates, for example, how these elite Bostonians supported compulsory education and encouraged youth to attend school while also preventing them from entering the workforce. By simultaneously suggesting education was the key to social mobility while at the same time limiting it, the Boston elite bolstered their own wages, credentials, and well-educated status. As Groeger's analysis suggests, selective Boston universities and the city's elite helped schools to become 'the institutional basis for reproducing hierarchies redefined as educational merit,' which allowed them to maintain 'significant economic power for themselves and their graduates' (p. 219).

While Groeger masterfully uncovers these truths for all levels of education, she also illuminates the consequences of these educational deceptions in terms of skilled labor and professionalism. Groups considered inferior were relegated to manual labor and personal service. Groeger documents, for instance, that despite having higher degree attainment than whites in the late nineteenth century and for much of the first half of the twentieth century, Blacks were still consigned to low-wage work and strategically excluded from 'white collar' (and top paying) positions. It was the type of labor that would never allow them to collectively rise out of poverty or elevate to a certain powerful social status. Those who were at the top of these networks held an assumption that certain positions and fields – from management to education to law to business – belonged only to them. And Groeger takes care to explain that scholars of today should keep this history of power in mind when considering the meaning of 'skills' and professions to avoid making false assumptions about their current value.

The important history that Groeger exposes throughout *The Education Trap* is further enhanced by the depth of her qualitative as well as quantitative data. In fact, the many tables and charts presented in each chapter further illustrate the significance of this history. Most of the quantitative data are used to contrast the experiences of white men with white women and the experiences and outcomes among white ethnic groups in terms of labor, education, and profession. As powerful as these data are, they also prompt questions about Blacks and other people of color who were not included in the presentation. Groeger did demonstrate that racial discrimination excluded many Blacks from employment, but a deeper discussion of the nature of this exclusion and how it infiltrated institutions of education would have been a welcome addition to this book.

Groeger details, for instance, how Harvard's 21st President Charles Eliot, a leader in education, was also a leader in maintaining the status quo. Eliot argued that those who attended Harvard had particularly strong moral character and were highly qualified, but Groeger does not discuss his ties to the eugenics movement. As an important ideological building block in strengthening labor and education inequality, eugenics was popular among a number of the Boston elite who argued science determined certain groups of people were inferior. It explains why people of color, as well as some white ethnic groups that Groeger does include in her analysis (Jews, Irish Catholics, Russians), were excluded from higher levels of education, employment, and status.

Groeger does show that these popular beliefs of inferiority help to explain changes in educational policy, including admissions and vocational education, that holds implications for today. *The Education Trap* is therefore an important read for anyone interested in labor history, the history of education, and public policy. The backlash against affirmative action but not legacy admissions (the policy to admit children of alumni) and the admissions scandal of 2019 are contemporary examples of the ways some groups of people, just like the networks that were established long before them, still seek to consolidate their power and privilege. Similarly, Groeger's attention to vocational education and later, vocational tracks, raises important questions about what vocational education really means. Groeger points out, for instance, that there was a time when vocational high schools were training grounds for white collar jobs. This suggests that even today, as policy and higher education leaders seek to divide vocational tracks from liberal arts, all formal education is to some extent vocational. Groeger's work, thus, pushes us to question what we think we know about education while also encouraging us to avoid the education traps set in the past and those still very present today.

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Divided unions: the Wagner act, federalism, and organized labor, by Alexis N. Walker, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020, 184 pp., \$59.95 (cloth), ISBN 9780812251821

The fall of Wisconsin: the conservative conquest of a progressive bastion and the future of American politics, by Dan Kaufman, New York, W. W. Norton, 2019, 336 pp., \$16.95 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-393-35725-7