

The Education Trap: Schools and the Remaking of Inequality in Boston

reviewed by Matthew Rankin - June 28, 2021

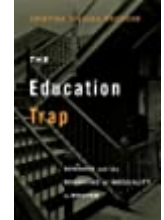
Title: The Education Trap: Schools and the Remaking of Inequality in Boston

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Cristina Viviana Groeger's *The Education Trap: Schools and the Remaking of Inequality in Boston* chronicles the rapid expansion of our nation's education and corporate economic systems, specifically honing in on the decades between 1880 and 1930. While contemporary discourse about the rise of social inequality tends to eye the 1970s as a flashpoint, Groeger unspools Boston's economic, political, and educational landscapes at the turn of the twentieth century, drawing acute parallels between these seemingly distant epochs. Vast economic transformation represents one of these key parallels. Much like the 1970s, which ushered in an era of unprecedented social inequality, the Progressive Era may also be defined in terms of stark economic polarization. Second, and perhaps the greatest commonality between said eras, is that of our national tendency to frame education as the cure-all for social inequality. A historical narrative, this book highlights a paradoxical thread that has woven its way through time, and compels readers to engage the following question: How can growing access to education exist within a climate of increasing social inequality? Using quantitative and qualitative historical data, Groeger cogently argues that education has possessed—and still possesses—a dual functionality, acting as both a tool for upward mobility and a mechanism for reproducing inequality.

The introduction directly addresses this paradox of education, setting the stage for an expansive yet granular study of how educational and economic transformations reshaped Boston's political economy and, ultimately, the nation altogether. Groeger successfully couches the book's chief argument within a host of relevant themes, including but not limited to notions of labor, status, local politics, power relations, socioeconomic hierarchies, and academic merit. The tenets and weaknesses of theoretical frameworks—namely those pertaining to human capital—are also illustrated, allowing the book's scholarly contributions to emerge to the fore. This section ends with a challenge to persistent dichotomies in the field of educational history, and compels readers to inject nuance into longstanding “public or private,” “secondary or higher,” “formal or informal,” and “vocational or liberal” debates. As Groeger offers, new ways of contextualizing schools, jobs, pathways to employment, and the institutional ecologies in which they are all embedded, are vital to national conversations about inequality and its potential remedies.

With keen analysis and accessible prose, Groeger transports readers to Progressive-era Boston, magnifying the interconnected geographies, institutions, and people that constitute this commercial hub of the late nineteenth/early twentieth century. Six chapters form the heart of *The Education Trap*, each interspersed with informative graphics to illustrate significant demographic, educational, and socioeconomic trends of the period. Chapter 1 frames Boston's political economy in terms of its “Three Worlds of Work,” those being the worlds of low-wage labor, craftworkers and shopkeepers, and elites. The chapter showcases how kinship ties, informal social networks, and craft-union apprenticeships—not education—facilitate pathways to work for most workers in the late 1800s. Given the marginal role of school with respect to gaining employment, on-the-job training is the rule of the day. Yet, despite the seemingly haphazard nature of the labor market, rigid ethnic and racial hierarchies persist, even as the Industrial Revolution brings about dramatic societal change.

Chapter 2 highlights the implementation of formal vocational training, as a potential remedy for poverty among low-wage workers. However, vocational training fails to meet this target goal, with low-wage workers favoring more practical modes of instruction to suit immediate social needs. Chapter 3 situates private and public education at the center of heated political battles, with employers and craft unions vying for control of employee-training processes in the industrial labor market. Groeger demonstrates how competing interests beget costly winner-loser scenarios, which serve to undermine schooling efforts.

Chapter 4 spotlights the feminization of white-collar work (i.e., pink-collar work), noting the impact of public education on women's—and to a lesser degree, second-generation immigrants'—clerical, secretarial, and retail employment. In the grand race to attract students for business training, public high schools and traditional colleges surpass for-profit, proprietary schools and become the leading pathways to white-collar jobs and social mobility. The educational and economic advances of women notwithstanding, the white-to-pink-collar transition elicits strategical responses from corporate elites, who strive to maintain their positions at the top of the occupational ladder.

Chapter 5 surveys the professions of law and education, showing how business elites and university leaders use professional strategies to centralize power. By wielding prestige, cultural status, and degree-granting powers, private colleges and universities exert tremendous influence over Boston's professional world. To maintain advantages in student training, private university leaders stymie

public institutions' degree-granting abilities, thus monopolizing credentialing power and setting national standards of expertise. These exclusionary practices even take shape within departmental ranks, where private law schools and universities exercise gendered professional stratification to separate male and female work. Chapter 6 extends the discussion about power consolidation. Here, Groeger examines the professionalization of business, the process by which financial and educational elites use educational credentials to secure the highest positions. This process formalizes the construction of "academic merit," which legitimates elite biases for students with specific social, cultural, and interpersonal qualities. College graduates who exhibit the highest forms of "merit" are funneled into management and executive positions, and effectively shape company cultures in their image. The professionalization of business ultimately reproduces social inequality, as corporate ladders tend to mirror the ethnic, gender, and racial hierarchies of society.

The Education Trap's conclusion urges readers to think about how Progressive Era trends may inform contemporary understandings of education—in terms of its limitations and promise. Groeger revisits the "education qua panacea ideal," and calls for broader, more critical discussions about the interconnectedness of education, credentialism, occupational structures, and political interests. For only then can serious attention, and substantive reforms, be directed towards the economic and political contexts to which education systems are inextricably bound.

In closing, *The Education Trap: Schools and the Remaking of Inequality in Boston* is an extensively researched, edifying contribution to education literature. Groeger succeeds in blending the macro-, meso-, and micro-levels of late nineteenth/early twentieth century Boston and produces an intricate, holistic picture of the city's inner workings. Policymakers, academics, and relevant stakeholders will find this text vitally informative—and be forced to rethink the role of education in American history, as well as its purpose today.

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