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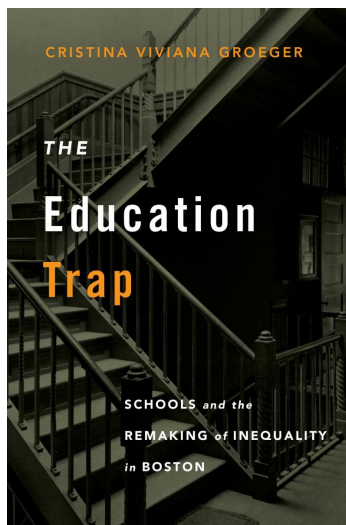
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The Myth of Higher Education's Magic

By Jeffrey Melnick



The Education Trap: Schools and the Remaking of Inequality in Boston by Cristina Viviana Groeger. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2021.

This review intends to outline some of the major interventions that Cristina Viviana Groeger makes into the historiography of public education, labor relations, immigration, and more in *The Education Trap*. But first, a little presentism!

The *Boston Globe* does not pay much attention to the University of Massachusetts Boston, where I have been teaching for over ten years. Suffice it to say that many of us sit up and take notice when the newspaper of record in Boston commits journalistic real estate to our campus, the only public research university in Boston and the much-touted “diversity flagship” of the

UMass system. When the anti-teachers’ union, probusiness *Globe* pays us any mind it tends to be in the form of “topaganda”—paean to the great work being done by this or that upper administrator at the university.

So I wasn’t surprised a few years back when the *Globe* ran a particularly puffy puff piece with the headline “UMass Boston chancellor works to link school with business community.” I silently corrected the titular error (*interim* chancellor), took a deep breath, and dug in. I was prepared for much of the (pro)business-as-usual rhetoric: the article noted that Interim Chancellor Newman “has been blazing a trail through Boston’s

business community in the past few months, meeting with as many leaders as she can. Her mission: bridging the gap between the UMass Boston campus and the major employers located within a short ride on the Red Line.” Okay, nothing new to see here—move along.

Hang on, though, what's this? “These companies have something she wants: jobs for UMass Boston students, more exposure for the faculty. But Newman has something to offer, as well: a deep pool of diverse workers.” Scared yet? It gets worse. The article goes on to explain that the interim chancellor had been organizing visits by industry leaders to campus during which the “visiting executives will review aspects of the school's curriculum, with a goal of ensuring the skills being taught match the ones they need.” For those of us who think all of our students deserve access to a broad-based education that prepares them not only for the workplace but also for contributing to the common good, this kind of job-preparedness rhetoric is chilling.

For a while, I thought Newman's words were a case of saying “the quiet part out loud,” mistakenly revealing a usually hidden agenda. But having since read Christina Viviana Groeger's terrific *The Education Trap: Schools and the Remaking of Inequality*, I now understand that Newman, like many others before her, deploys the rhetoric of advancement through public education as a bait-and-switch—a smokescreen for the implementation of vocational austerity. Groeger's book is that rare example of a scholarly work that functions simultaneously as a careful historical monograph (with remarkable archival and analytic energy), a persuasive polemic, and a public policy brief. This major, paradigm-shifting work joins the growing field of critical university studies challenging the conventional wisdom underlying too many conversations about public education as the great avenue of progress for historically marginalized groups.

On some level, what Groeger has done in *The Education Trap* is simply take at face value the words and actions of the most powerful people in Boston's educational arena—not just teachers, principals, and educational reformers but also politicians, industry leaders, and others from the late nineteenth century through the first few decades of the twentieth century. Sometimes the hardest interpretive task facing the diligent and earnest scholar is to recuperate these historical formations in their actual contours—as opposed to the shape they have taken in our most nostalgic and motivated renderings.

How gratifying, finally, to have a historian willing to move outside of the seductive and destructive fiction of education as the great leveler and to demonstrate persuasively that “schooling can in fact deepen economic inequality and conceal the ways in which educational merit has become a new foundation on which the inequality is justified.” Groeger is a systems thinker who capably explores the role played by public education in deepening existing social hierarchies by moving beyond a one-dimensional focus on curricula toward a broader, dynamic approach that considers schools as *institutions* organized around reproducing “traditional networks” of power.

As with so many other American stories, the narrative Groeger anatomizes is profoundly riven by the realities of race and class while all too often being cloaked in the language of equal opportunity. This is a case study of Boston that never loses sight of how the city's place as a center of elite universities and colleges has shaped the discourses surrounding education nationally. And while *The Education Trap* has some granular and acute observations about particular sites of educational contestation in Boston (trade union educational efforts versus the institutionalization of vocational education and the increasingly divided playing field that found teachers —female, Irish—on the one side, with their quasivocational training, and highly credentialed

administrators—male, Brahmin—on the other), Groeger's book obviously intends to, and should, stimulate conversations about why and how we fail to hold public education accountable for its role as an engine of inequality throughout US history.

I appreciate how efficiently Groeger skewers some deeply held fantasies about higher education. My favorite example concerns that area of educational activity we generally refer to as “vocational education.” Groeger demonstrates convincingly that working-class learners have not really advanced in any meaningful economic or social way through the vocational curricula offered in public school. As she writes, “the assumption that additional skill would elevate the status of an occupation, however, ignored the power imbalances that kept certain jobs at the top of the occupational hierarchy.” How bracing to read the words of an early twentieth-century activist teacher who called vocational education as then constituted in the public schools a “deliberate plan to ‘peasantize’ the children of working classes and provide cheap workmen with but a smattering of a trade.” Groeger also carefully chronicles how the development and institutionalization of vocational (or “industrial”) education was a conscious effort on the part of employers and their political allies to undercut the power of trade unions, which were trying to occupy the same social spaces vis-à-vis worker education.

Not surprisingly, the demography of industrial courses as opposed to college preparatory classes skewed dramatically by race and class. The painful legacy of this Boston-area division was evident in anecdotes I have heard over the past two decades about African American students at Cambridge's public high school who understood that Advanced Placement (AP) courses were mostly serving white students and who referred to the non-AP courses—the putative “college prep” or “CP” courses—as “colored people” courses. In what is perhaps her most deft rhetorical move, Groeger suggests that Boston's public schools *did* provide meaningful vocational training for *one* particular group of students: “Public education for white-collar employment was the most successful form of vocational education in the early twentieth century.”

Groeger recognizes that while public education was materially shaped by the culture's most powerful actors, the lived reality of this social sphere was articulated through an ongoing negotiation between purveyors and users. That is, large swaths of the population were approaching the hierarchical system of public education in an energetic and agential manner. *The Education Trap* provides plentiful evidence to demonstrate that low-wage (often new immigrant) parents were not looking for schools to provide job training—instead, they understood schools to be providers of what we would now understand as “wraparound” social services. Especially convincing here is Groeger's gloss on a summer “vacation school” in the North End of Boston that was patronized most often for its “childcare and entertainment” possibilities, as opposed to the summer courses it offered. Again and again, Groeger reminds the reader of the key structuring dialectic of public-school development in Boston: “educational services came to reflect a negotiation of interests between more affluent reformers and working-class attendees.”

Perhaps most poignant for anyone working in the educational sphere is Groeger's summative argument about education's main role in credentialing for “high-status, well-paid” occupations. Here, this intrepid historian reminds us that “successful professionalization” depended not on subject matter or skills taught but “upon the structural position of a particular occupation . . . and whether access to that occupation could be controlled and restricted.” *The Education Trap* is an urgent and convincing book, carefully researched and powerfully presented. I just wish that the most poignant lessons it had to teach us were only about the remote past and not our current moment of crisis.

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