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THE EDUCATION TRAP

CRISTINA VIVIANA GROEGER

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The belief that education is an engine of social equality is a deeply seated and enduring feature of the American political imagination. In the time before public schools were ubiquitous, early proponents of common schools, such as Horace Mann, argued that widespread educational attainment would lead to a more fair and equal society (Massachusetts Board of Education, 1848). The recently inaugurated Biden administration invokes a similar belief about education as a sufficient condition for success: per the campaign website, the administration will invest in education so that “regardless of their zip code, parents’ income, race, or disability, [all children] are prepared to succeed in tomorrow’s economy” (The Biden Plan for Educators, Students, and Our Future, n.d.).

But is education, as Horace Mann famously contended and the Biden administration continues to suggest, “the great equalizer,” or are society’s fruits disbursed according to less meritocratic forces? Assessing this conviction is the motivation at the heart of *The Education Trap*, Cristina Groeger’s history of labor and education in late nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Boston. As the title suggests, Groeger, a professor of history at Lake Forest College, finds reason to doubt Mann’s pronouncement.

In considering the evidence, Groeger traces the vicissitudes of Boston’s workforce from approximately 1880 to 1940, paying particular attention to the relationship between education, employment, and labor organizations. Groeger argues that Progressive Era Boston provides an illustrative case study of the relationship between education and social equality because the process of credentialing that emerged from this context provided the template for the model that would sweep the nation, structuring our current moment. Drawing on archival documents and newly accessible individual-level US Census data, Groeger catalogs changes in the labor market during this period of social and economic transformation and highlights how various educational initiatives— from philanthropic ventures aimed at elevating the professional dignity of lowstatus domestic labor to the growth of business education at elite colleges—failed to increase the pay or status of menial work or generate meritocratic pathways to desirable white-collar jobs.

The book is divided into six sections. It begins with a review of the social networks that governed life in Boston during the late 1800s, a time when a high school education was rare and pathways into even high-status work like legal practice did not require formal education. Groeger intersperses testimony from workers, reformers, and observers with well-presented graphs of census data to illustrate how the worlds of low-wage laborers, middle income craft workers, and elite professionals were all governed by kinship networks, racial and ethnic norms, and social connections. As immigration and industrialization threatened to upend these informal placement systems, however, the collective gaze turned to education as the presumed means by which entry into the new economy could be mediated. The book’s second section covers attempts by progressive reformers to elevate the status of low-wage “unskilled” work through occupational training, and the later sections address the rise and fall of craft and industrial unions, the growth of white-collar work and the concurrent feminization of certain subsequently “pink-collar” roles, and the ways that an expanding professional ladder leveraged elite educational credentials as a means to regulate access to the upper echelons of professional work. Throughout each section, Groeger keeps the reader’s attention focused on the contested nature of the emerging processes for translating formal

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The Education Trap

CRISTINA VIVIANA GROEGER

Unmuted

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learning into vocational success and on the people who were and were not able to take advantage of them.

The most distilled support for Groeger's challenge to Mann comes in those sections that describe the racial and ethnic covenants which circumscribed the vocational prospects of the city's low-wage workers. Black Bostonians, for example, attended school at higher rates than their white peers and attained literacy rates considerably higher than white immigrants, but they were nevertheless restricted from entering into many of the city's more lucrative lines of work. Patronage politics represented the other side of the same coin. Ward bosses used the city's desirable public-sector labor jobs to reward supporters and retain power, channeling the Irish into city jobs at much higher rates than their proportion of the unskilled labor population. In each of these cases, the influence of extra-educational forces in regulating the impact of education (or lack thereof) as a means to vocational success is stark.

While the argument that access to education alone will engender social equality is easily dispensed with, Groeger does highlight nontrivial instances in which educational opportunities were the means by which individuals were able to elevate their status. For example, as the corporate economy developed, schools that trained participants for office and sales jobs found success in helping thousands of second-generation immigrants and women achieve upward mobility as they placed graduates in the growing ranks of white-collar work. But the observation that neither educational opportunity nor educational attainment necessarily translates to either individual social advancement or widespread social equality is not a new one (e.g., Grubb & Lazerson, 2004), and readers may wonder whether a book-length journey to Progressive Era Boston is necessary to make the point.

The deeper value of *The Education Trap* ultimately comes from the detailed picture it presents of *how* various sectors and institutions did and did not leverage education as a means to improve worker status or expand access to given vocations. To that end, greater pains could have been taken to help readers make sense of these histories with respect to persistent questions of theory and policy. The book contains scant engagement with conceptual discourse on the purpose and function of education outside the motivations espoused and implied by the testimony of historical actors. Groeger alludes to some of this scholarship, situating the work within the debate between human capital and credentialist orientations to education early in the book, but these frameworks largely fade from view after their introduction, and the core of the book is mostly focused on explicating the power dynamics that regulated entry into the various worlds of work that defined turn-of-the-century Boston. (For readers interested in a more pointed conceptual analysis of the relationship between education and social equality, Danielle Allen's 2016 *Education and Equality* is thoughtful and engaging.)

Nevertheless, educators, policy makers, and labor advocates will likely find Groeger's account of competing interests in late-nineteenth-century Boston a valuable snapshot of the place and time and will emerge from reading the work sensitized to the contested dynamics from which key elements of our current educational-vocational pipeline emerged. Likewise, while Groeger is cognizant and respectful of the many lives that have been improved through educational pursuits of various kinds, the book succeeds as a cautionary tale for would-be reformers inclined to uncritically repeat bromides about egalitarian uplift through education. Understanding the book's lessons for contemporary audiences requires a fair amount of extrapolation. And while Groeger offers plenty of clear summary and analysis, there is room for debate about what readers should take away from the case study in terms of current policy and educational aims. That space for debate—and the interesting corpus of mixed-methods research from which it emerges—makes *The Education Trap* a work worthy of consideration for those with an interest in developing deep and nuanced understandings of the complex relationship between work, education, and society.

Eric Torres

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