Book Review

The Education Trap: Schools and the Remaking of Inequality in Boston by Cristina Viviana Groeger. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2021. 384 pp., $35.00 (cloth).

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The United States ranks second globally in the average years of schooling among adults. It also possesses one of the highest rates of income inequality and lowest rates of social mobility in the Global North. Why do these chart-topping levels of educational attainment and economic inequality coexist?

That is the timely question at the heart of Cristina Groeger's *The Education Trap* (2021), which traces the roots of this apparent paradox to the turn of the twentieth century. *The Education Trap* explores the interconnected expansion and modernization of the educational and corporate economic systems in Boston from 1880 to the Great Depression. Given Boston's prominence during this period, Groeger's detailed examination of the links among the city's politics, economy, and primary, secondary, and higher education systems enables her to tell a story whose significance extends far beyond a single site.

Groeger argues that "education became a central means of social mobility at the same moment that it became a new infrastructure for legitimizing social inequality" (Groeger 2021, 2). More specifically, she demonstrates how the growth of schooling simultaneously expanded economic opportunity for some Americans, undercut the workplace power of others, and strengthened the educational and corporate authority of elites. Although schooling occasionally enabled marginalized individuals to overcome discrimination, Groeger contends that "existing gender, ethnic, and racial hierarchies in the labor market were reproduced alongside and through an expanding school system" (4).

As schooling enabled more and more Americans, especially white women and working-class, second-generation immigrants, to ascend into sales and office jobs,

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the material benefits it generated fortified Americans' faith in schooling's ameliorative capacity. However, education became a "trap" because Americans embraced it as a solution to inequality even as it "provided a new institutional basis for reproducing class advantage" (12). That "new institutional basis" revolved around a small cadre of highly credentialed and compensated engineers and managers who oversaw a school-educated workforce increasingly comprised of midlevel white-collar workers and the lower-wage operatives who displaced the previous generation's higher-paid (and often unionized) craftworkers. The United States' equally high levels of educational attainment and economic inequality, Groeger shows, are not so much a paradox as they are two sides of the same coin.

Groeger illuminates the complex ways in which schooling both enhanced and impeded social mobility by complementing extensive quantitative data with equally rich qualitative evidence. Her book is among the first to use 100% samples of US manuscript census data from 1880 to 1940 from the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS), which is a project of the Minnesota Population Center at the University of Minnesota. That fine-grained data set, which only became available in 2017, includes demographic, occupational, and educational information for every person whom census takers recorded as living in Boston during the period of Groeger's study. Although historians have long mined manuscript census returns to learn about ordinary people, Groeger's embrace of quantitative data enables her to explore this evidence on a much grander scale.[1] She also helpfully explains how she analyzed these data in an essay on her personal website.[2] This digital extra provides a valuable stand-alone resource for teaching about historical research methods and exploring the possibilities of mixed-methods historical work.

Although the quantitative IPUMS data provide the skeleton for Groeger's study, she adds flesh to these numbers by illuminating the lives of the ordinary and elite actors whose experiences are embedded within them. She brings these people to life through institutional records, personal correspondences, student testimonials, oral histories, and employee personnel files that she located in seventeen local and regional archives. Russian Jewish immigrant Esther Zarkin is one of the many individuals whose experiences illustrate the larger economic and educational transformations that Groeger traces. Zarkin's father arrived in Boston in 1900, and the cap-sewing job he secured through a family contact served as a springboard for opening a cap-making company of his own that employed relatives and other Russian Jews. Twenty-six years later, Esther's commercial coursework at Dorchester High School led her to land a bookkeeping job at a local raincoat manufacturer. Her marriage to her boss's brother-in-law then solidified her middle-class status. However, by that time, the expanded role that higher education played in regulating access to and the structure of corporate America limited the workplace power of both white-collar women like Zarkin and the craftworkers whom her father had once employed.

In contrast to top-down accounts of schools as vehicles for social reproduction, Groeger shows that this process involved far more than economic and education systems working according to their elite architects' designs.[3] The book's six chapters proceed chronologically across multiple economic and occupational sectors: the low-paid service and manual labor that recent immigrants and African Americans frequently performed; craftwork in manufacturing and trades; the growing (and increasingly female) white-collar workforce; and the changing nature of professions in fields such as education, law, and business. Across each of these sectors, Groeger traces how a pair of educational "transformations" reordered the labor market in the decades after 1880. She identifies those transformations as "the failure of education intended to train students for low-wage and industrial work, and the success (and hence proliferation) of schools that trained students for white-collar and professional jobs" (11).

Chapter 1 explores the distinct worlds of Boston's low-wage workers, its shopkeepers and clerks, and its elite merchants, manufacturers, and learned professionals during the late nineteenth century. Groeger shows that education played only a partial role in job training and economic advancement across these three worlds. Instead of occurring in schools, training for work took place primarily on the job. Workers such as Esther Zarkin's father also largely accessed the racially, ethnically, and gender-segmented labor market through social networks that were divided along similar lines. Craftsmen, for instance, used apprenticeships both to train workers in trades such as carpentry, bricklaying, and metal work and to regulate entry into those fields. The role craftsmen played in controlling employment pipelines was a narrow form of worker power, which they wielded in accordance with "a masculine culture based on a shared white identity that excluded eastern and southern European immigrants, African Americans, and women" (35). Similarly, experience and informal apprenticeships mattered more than schooling in the late-nineteenth-century business world. As I. B. Arnold, the president of the National Retail Shoe-Dealers Association, explained in 1888, "The man with a common school education [and] much knowledge of the world . . . outstrips the man of high literary and scientific attainments" (44).

Chapter 2 initiates Groeger's exploration of the failure of education to elevate the status of lower-paying occupations. Although the preponderance of low-wage work in personal service and manual labor was a structural feature of the late-nineteenth-century economy, elite reformers such as Mary Morton Kehew consistently promoted vocational education as a solution to low pay and labor conflict. This reflected elite Bostonians' assumption that poverty was a result of personal failings as well as their desire to safeguard their own economic, political, and cultural power. Better to provide additional training to the poor, they suggested, than to alter the inequitable structures that produced inequality.

Kehew, the wife of an oil merchant and a college-educated descendant of an old-line Boston family, spearheaded the Women's Educational and Industrial Union's (WEIU) School of Housekeeping in 1897. She asserted that better training in kitchen, laundry, chamber, and parlor labor would "dignify housework in the eyes of both employer and employee by lifting it to the level of other trades" (69–70). However, the Irish and African American women who disproportionately filled domestic service jobs thought otherwise, and low enrollment forced the WEIU to close its School of Housekeeping within a few years of its founding. A similar dynamic unfolded in relation to southern and eastern European immigrants, who rejected schooling in skills for low-paying jobs in favor of early childhood education and instruction in English and citizenship. Groeger shows that this grassroots demand contributed to the expansion of those services in Boston's public schools. Although the growth of public schooling enabled some children of low-paid white immigrants to move into white-collar work, racial discrimination in the labor market meant that education yielded far fewer benefits for Black Bostonians, who posted some of the highest rates of school attendance in the city. "The experience of African Americans," Groeger writes, "should shatter historical illusions that education alone could open doors to better employment or improve one's working conditions" (93).

Chapters 3 and 4 document how the expansion of public schooling supported—and to a certain extent enabled—a labor market restructuring that concentrated power in the hands of employers rather than workers. In chapter 3, Groeger examines how conflict between employers and unions over the training process and workplace power prevented industrial education from providing a pathway into higher-paying industrial jobs. The anti-union origins of the occupation of "mechanical engineer" embodied this shift. As Groeger explains in one particularly illuminating passage, the overwhelmingly native-born shop owners who founded the American Society of Mechanical Engineers (ASME) in 1880 used the professional organization to bolster their power vis-à-vis foreign-born machinists in the unionized metal trades. By 1900, scientific management developed from the field of mechanical engineering through the work of Frederick Taylor. Taylor served as ASME's president in 1906, and his ideas became central to the curriculum of the Harvard Graduate School of Business Administration, where he lectured from its opening in 1908 until 1914.

The decline of craft union power in the 1910s and 1920s expanded economic opportunities and workplace power for the women, immigrants, and (to a lesser extent) African Americans whom craft unions had generally excluded. However, as Groeger explains in chapter 4, increasing employment opportunities for women and immigrants did not shake the deepening power of a native-born, white male Protestant elite. Ironically, the expanded role that public high schools played in providing training for the increasingly female fields of clerical and retail work

was central to this transformation. As commercial courses of study drove Boston's seventeen-fold increase in public high school enrollment between 1880 and 1940, the expanded pool of trained workers facilitated "the shift from small-scale firms reliant on craftworkers to large bureaucratized companies with hundreds or even thousands of white-collar staff" (142). Here, Groeger complicates understandings of the expansion of secondary education by convincingly showing that bottom-up demand from individuals such as Esther Zarkin contributed to the growth and "vocationalization" of high schools. She presents a similarly complicated picture of "pink-collar" workers such as Zarkin, who gained greater stability and independence in office jobs while remaining under the thumb of male managers.

Groeger turns her attention to the role that colleges and universities played in training professional and business elites in chapters 5 and 6. Political struggles between well-heeled Protestant Republicans and working-class and heavily Irish Democrats provide the backdrop for chapter 5. Groeger explains that elites lost their battle to deny degree-granting status to lower-cost public and proprietary schools that allowed working-class students to become teachers and lawyers, but they solidified the status of degrees from private institutions such as Harvard as the essential ticket into the upper echelons in education and law. In education, Harvard pioneered increased professional stratification—and created the Harvard Graduate School of Education in 1920—partly to ensure that privately educated Harvard men maintained authority over publicly educated female teachers. Harvard plays the villain in chapter 6 as well. Making excellent use of the records of the university's placement office, Groeger illustrates how, in the decades preceding World War II, business and university leaders used education credentials and identity-based definitions of merit to reserve the "most lucrative executive positions" (222) for native-born white men. Universities, Groeger demonstrates, did not simply respond to the new corporate world; they helped make it.

The Education Trap deepens the considerable historical and social scientific literature on the limits of education as a solution to inequality. For anyone seeking to understand why Americans repeatedly turned to schools to resolve the many social and economic challenges beyond their control, it is essential reading.

Notes

1. Manuscript census returns have been particularly valuable for historians of African American education. For models in the use of these rich yet imperfect sources, see Hilary J. Moss, *Schooling Citizens: The Struggle for African American Education in Antebellum America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); Kabria Baumgartner, "Searching for Sarah: Black Girlhood, Education, and the Archive," *History of Education Quarterly* 60, no. 1 (February 2020): 73–85.

2. Cristina Viviana Groeger, "Using Census Data in Historical Research," on Groeger's personal website, accessed January 14, 2021, https://tinagroeger.com/educationtrap-using-data.

3. Examples of this top-down approach stressing schools as vehicles for social control and reproduction include Michael B. Katz, *The Irony of School Reform: Educational Innovation in Mid-Nineteenth Century Massachusetts* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968); Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, *Schooling in Capitalist America: Educational Reform and the Contradictions of American Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1976); David Nasaw, *Schooled to Order: A Social History of Schooling in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979); James D. Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860–1935* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988).