

Cristina Viviana Groeger, *The Education Trap: Schools and the Remaking of Inequality in Boston*. Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 2021. 384pp. 24 illustrations. 1 map. £28.95 hbk.
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For decades, Americans have evinced a tremendous faith in education as the primary tool for overcoming disadvantage. Believing schools to be ‘the great equalizer’, political leaders, popular intellectuals and the broader public alike have long charged educational institutions with lifting individuals out of poverty by opening pathways to employment and facilitating upward mobility. But as Cristina Groeger notes, the comparatively high levels of education in the United States exist alongside stark socio-economic inequality. Given this seeming paradox, Groeger describes Americans’ myopic fixation on education as a policy ‘trap’ that fails to address – and even exacerbates – the very problem of inequality it seeks to remedy.

In *The Education Trap*, Groeger examines how Americans came to view education as a panacea for economic disparities. She centres the intertwined transformations of the educational system and corporate economy in Boston between 1880 and 1940, when social inequality surged even as access to education expanded rapidly. Turn-of-the-century Boston was a financial and industrial centre with a substantial immigrant population and an established patrician elite. Home to eminent private institutions of learning and a well-funded public school system, the city stood at the forefront of national movements for education reform and professionalization. Groeger argues that, as schooling became the key pathway into employment, education simultaneously facilitated opportunity and exclusion. Schools that trained students for white-collar and professional jobs successfully created economic opportunity for graduates, thus nourishing Americans’ abiding faith in education. At the same moment, the expansion of schooling remade inequality by undercutting worker power and providing new rationales to legitimize existing racial, ethnic, and gender hierarchies.

Groeger advances her argument through six well-conceived chapters that move across each sector of Boston’s economy. Chapter 1 establishes that in the late nineteenth century, most Bostonians found work informally through kinship and ethnic networks, thus promoting a segregated and hierarchal occupational structure. In the ensuing decades, educational expansion transformed the labour market in two distinct ways. On the lower rungs of the occupational ladder, school-based training for low-wage labourers (chapter 2) and industrial workers (chapter 3) failed. Contrary to reformers’ hopes, vocational training did not attract or elevate the status of manual labourers and domestic workers, and exploitative patterns of recruitment, employment and dismissal persisted. In the trades, conflict between craft unions and employers over control of training processes impeded industrial schools. As employers sought to undercut craft union power, they reorganized production to replace craftworkers with assembly-line operatives.

On the middle and uppermost rungs of the occupational ladder, education successfully facilitated entry into white-collar work and secured economic mobility for students – second-generation immigrant women – who pursued school-based clerical and sales training (chapter 4). In response, Boston’s native-born, white

male elite used advanced educational credentials to restrict access to managerial positions and to designate clerical and sales work as feminized, pink-collar labour. Professionals in law and education (chapter 5) and business (chapter 6) similarly relied on educational credentials and elite universities to tightly circumscribe entry into the most lucrative professions. By contesting the degree-granting authority of working-class institutions, establishing professional associations, operating job placement services and creating steep internal hierarchies within professions, the traditional elite maintained old racial, ethnic, class and gender hierarchies under the guise of educational merit.

Throughout, Groeger marshals a wealth of quantitative census data and qualitative archival data from institutional records, trade journals, newspapers and year-books. Minimalist graphs give striking visual representation to shifting demographic patterns, while the narrative is enlivened by the voices of students, teachers, employers and school officials. Groeger's analytical sophistication is also evident in her skillful interpretation of contrasting examples to strengthen her argument. For instance, Groeger describes how, in contrast to other craft trades, limited union power in the needle trades allowed industrial education in the sector to flourish; even so, school-based training did not safeguard needleworkers from industrial restructuring that shifted jobs toward low-paid machine operatives. Employer power, not educational status, determined their fate. Here and elsewhere, Groeger incisively considers how politicians, school and university administrators, employers, unions and professionals deployed networks of influence and wielded institutional power to shape the educational and occupational landscape.

While Black education is not a focus of this book, Groeger observes that the employment discrimination faced by Black Bostonians despite their high rates of school attendance should 'shatter historical illusions that education alone could open doors to better employment or improve one's working conditions' (p. 93). Future studies could benefit from more fully examining the experiences of Black and other racial minority students, workers and employers during these transformative decades in American schooling, capitalism and racism. Today, as more than a century ago, educational solutions to poverty continue to sidestep vital questions of systemic inequality, worker power and structural racism. As Groeger reminds us in this work of rich research, crisp prose and lively narrative, education is not an inherently equalizing force and cannot alone create a more egalitarian society.

Emily Y. Tran

University of Wisconsin–Madison

Lauren Pikó, *Milton Keynes in British Culture: Imagining England*. Routledge: Abingdon, 2019. 230pp. 15 figures. £120.00 hbk. £36.99 pbk. £36.99 eBook.
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Suburbs and new towns occupy a parallel place in British historiography and the broader national imagination, in that they rarely figure as potential stand-ins for