



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

By Cristina Viviana Groeger, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2020, 384 pages, illus, map, \$35.00, £28.95, €31.50, ISBN 9780674249110

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BOOK REVIEW

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For the last half-century in the United States, politicians on both sides of the political aisle have touted education and worker retraining as the solution to the problems of persistent unemployment and inequality wrought by economic restructuring and globalisation. Cristina Viviana Groeger's *The Education Trap* directly refutes that pablum. She reveals how both faith in schools as a tool of social mobility and the education system itself have directly deepened forms of inequality and circumscribed the rights and power of workers.

The problem of inequality—along with the obsession with meritocracy and human capital in the U.S.—has rightfully gained the attention of the public, politicians, and academics in a range of fields, including history. *The Education Trap* offers a new perspective and periodisation on these discussions. While most academics have looked to the late twentieth century to understand the root causes of contemporary economic and educational inequality, Groeger turns her attention almost a century earlier and to the single city of Boston. She traces how the modern educational system and modern corporate economy developed hand-and-hand and served simultaneously to promote social mobility and legitimate inequality. Blending qualitative and quantitative analysis, *The Education Trap* is an example of social history at its finest. This carefully conceptualised and well-organised monograph draws on a wide range of archival material as well as new datasets from the historical census in order to carefully reconstruct the labour market and social and corporate hierarchies of Progressive-era Boston.

The Education Trap makes a significant contribution to the field of business history. Groeger rightfully notes that the ongoing efforts to rewrite the history of capitalism have largely overlooked the topics of education and schooling. However, as Groeger convincingly contends, 'schools played a central role in the making of American capitalism (p.9)' both in training future workers and providing economic elites a mechanism through which to perpetuate and consolidate power. Business and labour histories have also tended to focus on abstract market transactions or exclusively on the shop floor. Groeger, on the other hand, explores the larger social and familial worlds of workers at various levels of the class and occupational structure. This approach enables her to show how class, race and gender hierarchies became reproduced within both the corporate economy and education system. Groeger should be commended for her attention to race and gender dynamics, which have been all too often marginalised in studies of business, labour, and capitalism.

In a further corrective, Groeger demonstrates how central issues of education became in struggles between management and labour as they struggled over workplace power. In fact, she is able to underline the importance of the debates over training and education because of the weight her historical actors gave to it. Workers and craft unions, Groeger reveals, were consistently resistant to vocational education and school-based industrial training especially in public schools, recognising the various ways it would thwart their opportunities and power. The resulting expansion of the public school curriculum enrolment offered some white women and working-class ethnics a mechanism for entry in white-collar clerical work and a means of social mobility. Yet, on the whole, Groeger contends this expansion did not lessen existing class, race and gender

hierarchies and inequities, nor did it provide a means to worker empowerment. Instead, it did the opposite.

Groeger demonstrates how business and educational elites reacted largely to the social and economic changes afoot by finding new ways to maintain and even expand their power. In the final chapter, she illustrates these developments by turning to the rarely explored arena of post-collegiate placement services. Through eye-opening research carefully plumbed from the archives of Harvard's placement office, Groeger shows at the most granular level how higher education came to perpetuate concentrations of wealth and power and actively shape the corporate economy and culture. *The Education Trap's* attention to the role of higher education in the constructing of the modern corporate world and financial elite represents another critical intervention into the study of American capitalism.

Groeger's deployment of a community study model serves as a strength and a weakness. It allows her to explore Boston's educational, economic, social and labour systems and the interactions between them at a level of depth and detail that would mostly likely be impossible with a national or comparative frame. However, her laser focus makes some of her larger and bolder claims not fully convincing. For instance, she argues: 'the revolution in business training made possible the corporate restructuring of the economy, the growth of the nascent American welfare state, and the rise of a new middle class (140-141)'. She also states that education became 'the chief public policy to address problems of work and employment (p.180)' in the early 20th century. These are very provocative claims. However, they would have been more convincing if Groeger had at key places connected more of what was going on in Boston to national trends and policy debates. On the whole, however, the book is a powerful rejoinder to the argument that education alone can serve as the panacea and makes a powerful contribution to and connects the subfields of business, labour and education history. It merits the widest possible readership.

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