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Book Review: The Education Trap: Schools and the Remaking of Inequality in Boston¹

Gisselle Rodriguez Benitez²

As inequality rises in the United States, advocates and politicians often set their targets on equalizing the playing fields of schooling. To critically discern the potential of educational equity, it is imperative to question the historical reforms that have built our existing systems. In her recent book *The Education Trap*, Cristina Groeger, a historian of American work and education, considers Boston as a case study through which to see the power structures that shape the educational landscape. Through cross-sector and longitudinal analysis, Groeger argues that reforms designed to transform education have merely “created a new institutional foundation for social inequality” (p. 258), challenging the dominant macro-level views of education’s role in society and the economy. Incorporating a gender analysis, Groeger also provides a critical lens of opportunity in this continuously stratified economy.

The book covers the end of the industrial revolution in the 1880s to the commercial and educational shifts triggered by World War II. Between these crucial decades, Boston, like many American cities, experienced rapid demographic, and economic transformation. Various sectors moved away from highly specialized labor and toward automated, large-scale production models. Simultaneously, ethnically and religiously diverse migrants came to dominate a historically Anglo-Saxon, Protestant labor force. Certain lower-level professions and industries were feminized, shifting the relationship between gender and labor. Through analyzing a time marked by constant change, Groeger evaluates the continuous attempts at mending inequality with education-based solutions. Most of these efforts centered around shifting the perceived value of distinct sectors and their resulting employment opportunities. In her book, Groeger argues that these reforms, be they via changes to access or curriculum, failed to substantially alter the hierarchical structure of Boston’s economy. Instead, stratification was reproduced throughout alterations to employment pathways, primarily through limiting and broadening access to certain professions.

In the introduction Groeger evaluates the current political and intellectual narrative of education’s capacity to alleviate poverty and inequality – connecting this historical analysis to contemporary discourse. The rest of the book assesses the educational reform aimed at low-wage work and the establishment of education institutions shaped by and for the white-collar sectors. Groeger first highlights relatively unsuccessful efforts originating in unions, governments, and philanthropic organizations that sought social and economic mobility for workers in the service, manual, and trade industries. She contrasts these reforms to the reshaping of high schools and colleges to meet the demands of early corporate America. The next chapters compare the professionalization of law, a historically male-dominated field, with education, where men historically only worked in the highest positions. The final chapter connects the role of elite educational institutions to the proliferation of hierarchical corporate structures that continue to perpetuate gender and class stratification. The internal structure of each chapter outlines each of these educational sectors’ contexts and the author’s principal findings and concludes with a synthesis of those main contributions. Though occasionally repetitive, this provides a clear organization of the connections the author makes, creating material that is both detailed and digestible to less specialized audiences.

Groeger considers several common themes across these chapters. By detailing the motivations and subsequent actions of worker unions, political blocs, employer associations, and non-profit organizations, she maps the influential decision-makers of each sector. Providing a narrative of the formalization of the network-based pathways to employment, Groeger demonstrates how strategies in the labor market

¹ Groeger, C. V. (2021). *The education trap: Schools and the remaking of inequality in Boston*. Harvard University Press.

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influenced the purpose of secondary and college education. Integrating external events that shaped the prominence of economic players, she draws attention to the interconnected nature of education reform and the greater social and political spheres. Due to the importance of collective power to the central thesis of the book, I would have appreciated more evidence of the alignment of workers, students, and parents to their respective organizational leadership.

Each chapter is supported by mixed-methods evidence. In the introduction, Groeger notes her work is “among the first book-length studies to use new 100 percent samples of [Integrated Public Use Microdata Series] historical census microdata” (p. 5). This data allows her to include detailed, longitudinal breakdowns of the workforce and student populations from the 1880s to the 1940s. These demographic analyses consider not only gender and race but also parental heritage and occupation. Groeger supplements this data with primary sources retrieved from contemporary newspapers, trade journals, correspondence, and testimonials.

When comparing the intentions of for-profit and philanthropic institutions predominantly using the human-capital rationale for education, with their observed outcomes, Groeger uses school advertisements, enrollment data, and yearbook testimonials. This clarifies the institutions’ marketed added value, while providing insight into students’ perceptions of their education and resulting early professional trajectories. For example, Groeger cites an advertisement for a 1900 stenography program. The institution advertises the in-demand skills obtained by the students enrolled, and the importance of education in obtaining positions of higher rank. Alumni testimonials, in contrast, focus on the connections that the institution provided them when seeking jobs. As Groeger notes, this sort of network facilitation was particularly important for women and second-generation immigrants. In another example, Groeger focuses on a philanthropic organization attempting to “uplift” domestic work. Pointing to the lack of enrollment from the targeted audience, female domestic workers, she concludes that this organization repurposed its mission to cater to a group with more time and capacity to take courses: college-educated women. This combination of evidence allows the author to conclude that educational programs had considerable disconnect between their intended and actual contributions.

Groeger also uses studies led by governments and research institutions during the period evaluated, exemplifying the interests of these groups while critically incorporating their findings. For instance, to provide context to the changing demographics of the female domestic workforce, Groeger quotes an 1897 survey and a 1901 study examining the flight of white women leaving this sector. Groeger adds that beyond the related negative social conditions (lack of respect, free-time, and autonomy), native-born white women also sought to distance themselves from employment that was increasingly associated with foreign-born and Black women. Groeger additionally considers related literature to substantiate the importance of certain phenomena, like the influence of the German industrial education model, and to draw attention to the insufficient focus on sociological structures and marginalized groups in the prominent scholarship. When analyzing the stratification of the early white-collar sector, she notes that related studies “neglect the role of women and downplay the sense of achievement of many who were able to access this work” (141). By analyzing structural inequality faced by women, immigrants, and Black Americans in their pathways and experiences as workers, Groeger identifies educational reform as an embodiment of long-term power imbalance.

The Education Trap is a wonderful example of using the intersectional history of disparities to challenge the prominent theories currently shaping reform efforts. Groeger demonstrates that systemic decisions have shaped the interconnection of education and employment networks. Through the focus of power and stratification, her analysis gives scholarly backing to the more colloquial proverb “it's not what you know, it's who you know.” Because of the clear writing and structure, I strongly recommend this reading to anyone with at least a foundational understanding of the American economic and political landscape of the time.

This case of refreshing perspective and thorough evidence is an essential read for anyone interested in gender, labor, or social policy studies.