

especially when Block digs into the analysis of a specific dress. This book can be a great companion to those who enjoy the rich visual world of HBO's *Gilded Age* and want more, but it is also a reminder of the importance of fashion and culture in the history of the Gilded Age.

Hierarchy and Higher Education

Groeger, Christina. *The Education Trap: Schools and the Remaking of Inequality in Boston*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2021. 384 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0674249110.

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doi:10.1017/S1537781422000202

Why is the United States a leader in educational excellence and economic inequality? In *The Education Trap*, Cristina Groeger tackles this question and finds the answer in the Progressive Era. Progressives saw schools as a policy solution to inequality and thereby put “the blame, and the burden of reform, on individuals rather than society” (9). Building the myth that schools provided a social panacea to inequality, elites used the broadening of access to education as a tool to maintain power and reinforce socioeconomic inequality while avoiding pressure to create a robust welfare state.

Groeger sets her story in Boston, a city with a well-established public school system, a wealthy tax base, and powerful private universities. The first chapters of her book uncover the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century conditions that led more Americans to pursue degrees as credentials for greater employment opportunities. Before 1880, most workers didn't see schools as an avenue for social mobility. Training came on the job. Then came the economic and social upheaval that expanded both white-collar work and school enrollment. It's a story that readers of this journal will know well, but Groeger takes advantage of newly available Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS) historical census data to offer new insights.

One of the most important stories in Groeger's book is a story of failure. Schools became the pathway to white-collar jobs, but not to blue-collar work. That failure came out of a struggle between employers and unions over who would control industrial education. Employers wanted to challenge organized labor's power by creating trade schools outside the purview of labor unions. While unions protected their control over training for certain skilled work, neither group successfully gained power over public industrial education training that might have acted as a gatekeeper for working-class positions. In the end, Groeger argues, this failure helped reinforce existing social inequalities. Without a close relationship with employers, public industrial education failed to

become a credential for working-class positions. Instead, public schools used industrial tracks to segregate students—largely students from low-income families and students of color—who were deemed “underperforming,” helping to devalue industrial education and making it more difficult for such students to find well-paying jobs.

Grammar schools and high schools found more success as pathways into white-collar jobs, especially for women. Here Groeger demonstrates how schools came to be seen as engines of social mobility while they reinforced existing hierarchies. The economic transformations of the period created an unprecedented demand for white-collar work. Office and sales positions were the fastest growing sector of the job market. Employers turned schools into credentials for these positions, taking training power away from organized labor and giving management more control over the workplace. A grammar school education offered a path to clerk and copyist positions, and a high school education led to stenographer and secretary positions. But Groeger doesn't make this a simple top-down story. Women's bottom-up demand for this kind of training reshaped public education and hierarchies in the workplace. Each level of educational attainment offered women better pay and reinforced the idea that education led to social mobility. At the same time, these positions became gendered, creating a “pink-collar” sector that paid less than jobs reserved for men.

Expanded access to higher education followed efforts to preserve existing hierarchies. In the twentieth century, a post-secondary degree increasingly became a required credential for professional positions. The battle over which post-secondary institutions could provide training for the most lucrative professional jobs cemented the stratification of higher education. Private universities played an outsized role as they fought against the opening of new public universities and attempted to limit the types of degrees they could offer. Readers who see Harvard as the boogeyman of higher education will find much to support their views here. During the Progressive Era, Harvard administrators used their political clout, along with the political clout of alumni, to protect the institution's near monopoly as the gateway to corporate law and executive positions, as well as education administration. This post-secondary stratification, with Harvard at the top, helped Boston elites justify huge differences in salaries between the top and bottom of the professional sectors.

Refreshingly, Groeger doesn't shy away from the policy implications of her findings. First, she argues that the lessons of the Progressive Era suggest that anyone interested in addressing economic inequality in the United States must redirect their attention away from expanding access to education credentials and focus on the organization of workers to build a political power base capable of addressing structural issues. Education can be a tool to reduce social inequality or maintain it. It depends on who has the power necessary to determine its role.

Second, her research sheds light on contemporary debates over for-profit schools. During the Progressive Era, as in our current moment, public for-profit schools served students left out of private and nonprofit public institutions. Some of the most successful served women who wanted credentials for office and sales positions. Expanding free, public alternatives in Boston eventually led to the demise of these proprietary schools. Groeger therefore concludes that taking away the demand for propriety schools, rather than regulating them, offers the best policy solution to protect students from the exploitive practices of for-profit schooling.

Finally, Groeger challenges scholars to rethink the popular declension narrative of higher education, which complains of the vocationalization of colleges and universities. Such a narrative laments the transformation from a “liberal” education to vocational

training for particular professions. Groeger suggests that the Progressive Era should remind us that a “liberal arts” education has long been vocational. “Failing to acknowledge the role of our educational system in the distribution of economic benefits,” Groeger contends, “will hinder efforts to liberate education for the pursuit of nonvocational ends” (253).

Groeger’s book is an important contribution to the histories of the Progressive Era and education. It will be on my shelf for a long time.

The Biography of a Woman Erased

Nielsen, Kim E. *Money, Marriage, and Madness: The Life of Anna Ott*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2020.
ix + 131 pp. \$22.00 (paperback), ISBN 978-0252085017.

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doi:10.1017/S1537781422000214

In *Money, Marriage, and Madness: The Life of Anna Ott*, Kim Nielsen calls biography “a powerful and effective tool” (105). In this somewhat sparse yet fascinating work, Nielsen tells the story of Dr. Anna Barbara Blaser Miesse Ott, a woman largely unknown until this book’s publication. She was not a particularly noteworthy or significant woman in her own time, but that is exactly the point of Nielsen’s biography of her: those who might seem unimportant are not irrelevant. Ott was “a woman whose life mattered and matters” (2), Nielsen argues. Ott immigrated to the United States from Switzerland in 1834. She married her first husband, Dr. Jonathan Miesse, a few years later. The couple divorced in 1856, leaving Ott with money and the medical expertise gained as a physician’s wife. She married her sister’s widower, George Ott, that same year. In 1873, he institutionalized Ott after she filed multiple divorce filings and complained of horrific spousal abuse. When he was not made Ott’s guardian, and therefore failed to gain any control over her considerable wealth, George divorced her in 1881. Ott spent the rest of her days in the Wisconsin State Hospital. She died in 1893.

Although elements of Ott’s life are noteworthy—having multiple divorces during the nineteenth century, claiming the title of “doctor” for herself, and being institutionalized—Nielsen convincingly argues that none of these events, in and of themselves, deviated far from the norms for midwestern women at the time. Nielsen’s purpose is not to tell us about a remarkable woman, but to show how “law shapes lives and families, as well as the geographical and conceptual boundaries of a life, and that law itself reflects the power structures of historical periods and places” (2). Because of changes in the law regarding women’s property, and the loosening of divorce statutes, Ott and Miesse were able to divorce, and Ott was able to retain control over wealth and gain custody of her daughter. The law also made it impossible for Ott to divorce her second husband despite clear signs