

#107 Learning to Earn

**Jennifer Berkshire** Welcome to Have You Heard, I'm Jennifer Berkshire.

**Jack Schneider** And I'm Jack Schneider.

**Berkshire** And our topic today is one of my very favorite themes: How education embedded inequality. Jack's nodding.

**Schneider** Yeah. That's, that's the thing.

**Berkshire** Now, Jack, this is where you step in and point out that while my interest may be very contemporary. In fact, this topic has deep historical roots.

**Schneider** It's an old story. Yeah. Right. This is an old story that's sort of ripped from the headlines, right? That we have rising inequality. And yet we also see people acquiring more and more education, not only publicly funded, pre-K through 12 education, but higher education as well, such that now, right? There's this burgeoning of free college movement because people feel like, you know, college is you know, the new high school, essentially in terms of what one must have in order to gain an entry-level credential in the workplace. So you know what what's going on here? It turns out that this story has roots that are well over a century old. And Tina Groeger is going to join us today to talk a little bit about that.

**Berkshire** Well this story starts with my learning about a brand new book and getting very excited - a familiar tale to regular listeners. The book is called The Education Trap: Schools and the Remaking of Inequality in Boston. Author Cristina Groeger's destination was another time in America when inequality was raging: the Gilded Age of the early 20th century. Just like today, more education was offered up as the fix for helping workers get ahead. And also like today, the solution, well, it didn't work. So she set out to understand why.

**Cristina Groeger** The sort of vision that John Dewey has of using schools essentially to transform the economy was, yeah, it was very attractive. But the question of why doesn't progressive education actually lead to this much broader structural change was an ongoing question for me. And so basically I started this project with the question of like, why does progressive education fail in doing what do we thought it would do? And then that led me to taking on a much bigger sort of like political economy history of this period, to understand how education and the political economy related, you know, were always connected so that they really like helped shape each other. And all of the inequalities of the new corporate economy became part of the new school system.

**Berkshire** We tend to think of rising inequality as a relatively recent phenomenon. But as Cristina delved into an earlier unequal era, she discovered a lost history and a lot of lessons that have gone ignored.

**Groeger** You know, it makes sense that there's a lot of attention on the seventies where you start seeing this new shift towards rising inequality, wage stagnation. But I think what's so striking is that if you just go back a little bit earlier, there are so many parallels between right now and the early 20th century. And because there are these parallels, we can learn a lot from, you know, the first time that this was happening late 19th, early 20th century is also where so many features of kind of our modern corporate economy were created. That it makes sense to, to look at that era for really important dynamics or important patterns that then really set the stage for future developments in the 20th.

**Berkshire** What's so striking about the history that Tina recounts is how familiar it feels. That's because what we think of today as the human capital model of education where we invest in our skills and then reap the rewards on the job market and in life, well, the Gilded Age is when that way of thinking really begins. And as that dream really began to take hold, there were plenty of early 20th century edupreneurs ready to cash in on it.

**Groeger** A number of things stand out as sounding just, you know, could have been said today. So the turn to vocational education and saying, you know, if only we had more training that would like directly feed students into well-paying jobs, especially industrial education, even though, as I talk about in the book that never really didn't work, then I don't think it's going to work now comparisons to European educational institutions and education as a means of international competitiveness. You know, all of that was present in the progressive era. One of the things I was not expecting is this whole sort of sector of proprietary, you know, what we would now call for-profit institutions. I took a whole series of photographs of just like advertising educational advertisements on subways and buses when I was working on this project. And like some of the same language you see in these advertisements for proprietary commercial schools in the early 20th century, you know, like come to this school and you will gain all the training, you need to be a successful business person, just sort of selling the human capital model of education.

**Berkshire** So Jack Christina has been painting this vivid picture for us of the gilded age and really this first period of profound inequality in America. And I want you to take us up to the present and walk us through this idea that there's this kind of educational paradox, right. That we believe so deeply that education is going to be the thing that fixes inequality. And yet it can't.

**Schneider** Yeah. I think one of the things that she argues, so persuasively here is that more education does not necessarily lead to more social mobility. In fact it may be the opposite. And that's the paradox, right? That in the United States, we have globally the second highest rate of education in terms of how much education is received by individuals in this country. We're second, only to Germany. And yet we're near the top in terms of social inequality. We have, you know, huge chasms between the wealthy and the poor in this country, despite the fact that we have universal public education, pre-K through 12th grade and then many people gain access to higher education through our community college system. So the questions she's essentially asking here is what gives?

**Berkshire** Now, if you're a regular listener to this podcast, you are probably familiar with what's known as the high school movement. That was the period when high schools sprouted across the land and new students - especially women and second-generation immigrants - flocked to take advantage of them. But as Cristina discovered, this mass expansion of educational access turns out to have had more to do a transformation of the economy and employers pushing for workers to be trained in schools.

**Groeger** In this period, kind of the emergence of large mass production scale industries, big corporate bureaucracies become filled with clerks, accountants, bookkeepers, secretaries, new kinds of white collar employment in business. And this sector of work, you know, those kinds of jobs are easier to learn in a school setting than say craft skills, but they're not central to the existing public school system. So first on the scene, you see these proprietary, they call themselves commercial colleges or business colleges, but most of them are kind of like high schools that begin to offer training for these new types of jobs. And I argue that the rise of the public high school we should actually understand is kind of a reaction, at least in urban centers like Boston as kind of a reaction to the success of these proprietary schools that, although on the one hand they are offering new kinds of training to populations that were not well served by the public sector. I argue that that's actually an important driver of the public high schools, and this is the era known as the school movement, huge expansion of secondary education, biggest demographics are women. Second generation immigrants, kind of working class students who start using high schools, usually not even until graduation, but just for a few years to get the skills that they need in commercial. They're called commercial classes to then enter this sector of work.

**Schneider** Okay. I just want to test my understanding here by attempting to restate to you what the argument is here. So bear with me and, and be gentle. So the idea is that in order to gain more control over their own shops and industries management essentially promoted a new class of workers, a white collar managerial class that had been educated in the schools. These are people who primarily had high school degrees a hundred years ago and who have college degrees now, and then sought to use those people to manage less skilled and more mechanized labor in order to essentially break the power of these skilled craft workers who increasingly were threatening the kind of top-down authority of those who owned the means of production.

**Groeger** I would say the one, one important dynamic is that in basically in trying to destroy the power of craft unions, employers try to basically come up with other types of business models that don't rely so heavily on very specialized craft workers. And one of those is giant mass production industries that has a much bigger proportion of white collar workers. So in sort of pursuing this industrial strategy, white collar workers expand, but then an important dynamic in that sector is that you also differentiate the white collar worker sector. So you get, you know, the vast majority of what becomes pink collar work, right, or feminized labor at the lower end. So most clerical workers and sales workers are women. And then, you know, at the top, this kind of

managed new, powerful managerial class that gets consolidated by elite white men. For the most part that then can use more advanced education to secure those positions.

**Berkshire** My favorite thing about the book was just how shockingly familiar it felt. And I'm thinking about, you know, like here you have from basically the earliest days you have all these do gooders in Boston and they're sitting around and they're thinking, gee, you know, these workers, they're not making very much, it must be because they lack skills and we want them to make more, but we're going to take a couple of things off the table. They can't band together to demand more money and we want to leave basically the essential structure in place. Now go ahead.

**Groeger** Yeah, no, I mean, that was also a kind of like striking and maddening repeated line that these professionals usually like college educated reformers. And I think with, with good intentions often sort of imposing a model of professionalization, which maybe worked for certain occupations that I argue, right? Like what makes a successful profession is usually it has to have some very central role in profit making in the corporate economy, but, but sort of assuming like, Oh, all that you need to make a higher status profession is more training and more education. And that is, that will turn you into an expert and then you'll be rewarded in the labor market with higher wages. The example in the book that sort of the most striking is creating these schools of housekeeping to train domestic servants, to become right, like professionals in domestic work. And nobody shows up no, no domestic servant is going to want to, if they have the time they're going to go to school for a different kind of work, they're not going to go to school to improve their skills, to become a better domestic worker. I think we can see it as a sort of like professionalism or professional ideology, really misinterprets, just like how power works in the labor market and leads to all of these sort of failed education attempts.

**Berkshire** Then as now employers saw a clear benefit and having job training be something that the schools did and something workers themselves were ultimately responsible for.

**Groeger** A lot of early pushes for industrial education and then support for public education. I think for employers was that they saw the benefits of having a more educated workforce and it was something that they would support maybe through taxes a bit, but it meant that they didn't have to take on the training responsibilities for workers themselves. And because it's this sort of putting the burden of becoming a better worker onto individuals, it's also, I think, helpful for employers because it sort of takes away the, the attention on them and their role in the political economy. And essentially is a good way of like ideologically of, of blaming workers if they don't get a job or if they aren't successful in the labor market, rather than having people think about other possible solutions.

**Schneider** Of course, one of the ironies is that employers will often bemoan the absence of career ready training and we'll issue, you know, these jeremiads about, you know, what K-12 schools and maybe community colleges also ought to be doing. You know, a part of that, it seems to me is because despite the fact that workers are not prepared for these jobs, at least corporations are putting the bill for it, right? Taxpayers are.

**Groeger** Yeah, I mean, it's so easy for employers to blame anyone but themselves for the, you know, the, this imagined skills gap, which has largely been debunked. But you keep hearing it right. The skills shortage. Usually there's not a skills shortage. It's that employers aren't paying workers enough because if you raise wages, there might be more employees interested in training for that position. So I think employers can rely on educational arguments really as a way of sort of diverting the blame onto workers or right onto the public education system that isn't doing enough to train future workers that becomes a very handy excuse for them.

**Berkshire** The Education Trap is really a book about worker power. How craft unions lost power at the turn of the 20th century, and how the shift to more educated labor was in many ways intended to weaken the ability of workers to make demands. Fast forward to the present, and Cristina argues that if we really want a more equitable society, we have to move beyond schools and focus on what's happening in the workplace.

**Groeger** I mean, I think this is where the importance of worker power of sort of the economy efforts that can actually increase wages improve working conditions like that has to be first because so often students and families, right, and the population is they're pursuing education, but a big motivating factor is in order to access a well-paying job. But you know, those jobs are shrinking growing more on equal economy and lacking sort of real worker power. I think more and more education is only going to perpetuate those trends. So I think if we, if we can kind of prioritize the labor issues at stake here, we could minimize this, right. This sort of ongoing credentials race. And that could also then free up our educational system for other other things, right? Like it's, so it's not inherently bad that, you know, everyone stay in school for 16 years, but like we could be doing other things with that time. Or we could, you know, be doing other things that are not education with that time. But I think we can't, we can't really solve the problem where we can't halt that expansion unless we focus first on like what, what is actually going to improve jobs in the economy and that's not going to be more and more education.

**Berkshire** OK - so I had one final question for Cristina. I can already predict that one of the responses we'll get to this episode is that it's a little rich that we're talking about a quote unquote education trap when all three of us hold PhDs. And two of us are gainfully employed with academic jobs. No reason to go into the employment status of the other one. She says she gets that critique.

**Groeger** I went to Harvard. I graduated from their graduate program. I think in some ways, you know, that that's like a fair accusation, although I will also say that seeing it from within also is very illuminating and seeing the way that it operates, seeing the way that like elite education can really concentrate power. You know, you, you can see that better, I think from within some of the most elite institutions, but totally. Yeah, that is a, that is a fair critique.

**Berkshire** That was Cristina Groeger. She's an assistant professor at Lake Forest College and the author of a fantastic new book The Education Trap: Schools and the Remaking of Inequality in Boston. And Jack and I will be right back to wrap things up and I'll be surprising him with the topic of this episode's In the Weeds segment. Free market fever is finally on the wane, except

for - wait for it - education. If this intrigues you, just go to [Patreon.com/haveyouheardpodcast](https://patreon.com/haveyouheardpodcast) to become a supporter.

[Music]

**Schneider** One of the points that Tina makes here is that schools actually are pretty good at preparing people for some kinds of work and that they're not very good at preparing people for other kinds of work. And I'm thinking here about some obvious reasons that may actually compel our listeners to believe this fact because in this country, it is just often presumed that anything related to work can and should be done through the schools at least at some level. But consider that if we're talking about skilled trades, that there's equipment associated with that and that essentially as soon as schools have made those capital expenditures, the equipment that they've purchased is immediately out of date that schools just simply keep retooling at the speed that industry can. And there's something quite similar in terms of staffing, right? That teachers would have to be retrained constantly because they're not actually working in industry.

So they're not participating in the changing field that they're ostensibly preparing young people to enter. And so the idea that you are buying equipment that is instantly out of date and you're hiring people to teach classes that are instantly out of date I think is a really compelling reason not to teach certain kinds of workplace skills in schools. And then finally, there's the piece that is, you know, if teachers were able to teach those things, they often could get jobs in industries that are a lot more lucrative than teaching. You know, there's simply no competition there as opposed to, you know, if you want to be a writer for instance and you know, it's, it's either teaching or freelance, right? Teaching sure. Beats the heck out of freelance in terms of paying the bills. There aren't that many people who are able to be professional historians, right there aren't that many jobs. Now you do get into competition for folks in some of the areas where we've actually seen scarcity in terms of math and science fields. So the point here is just that, you know, I think we need to be a little bit more thoughtful in terms of what schools actually could plausibly do in terms of workplace preparation.

**Berkshire** So Jack, our regular listeners know quite a lot by now about how you've spent your pandemic. We hear all the talk about you being teaching online and, and your daughter, how she's virtually educated. And, but I bet people are wondering, well, what about Jennifer? What she'd been up to. And weirdly...

**Schneider** That is, that is an elaborate set up for yourself there, go on, go on

**Berkshire** This whole time, my husband and I have been writing a book about the history of the largest electrical workers union in Boston, which eerily parallels the story that we heard about from Tina and in many ways comes out as a kind of, kind of shining success story of what things could have been. They have, they have almost kind of like a social democracy and the rub on trade unions is often they, they sort of hoard opportunity for their members that Oh, sure, right, these guys earn, you know, 50, \$60 an hour. They have fantastic benefits, but so much of their power derives from keeping people out. And that's not the story of this union at all, that they,

they realized at a certain point that if they were going to gain market share, right, they couldn't limit access to just the sons. Right. And you see the union gaining in size and diversity and strength through that. And as a result now, they are powerful for exactly the sorts of reasons that Tina mentioned.

**Schneider** Right. And that's exactly the kind of power that Tina argues in her book industrialists were trying to break in terms of their deskilling of labor, their reliance on management to oversee a less skilled labor force, relying more and more on mechanization. And that has served them quite well in terms of being able to set the pay scale in a way that returns value to shareholders rather than to workers.

**Berkshire** Well, Jack, I have to say that I loved working on this episode. Tina's book is fantastic. And I really enjoyed getting to go back in time to a period that it turns out you didn't really know all that well.

**Schneider** Oh yes, that's right. I had to look a couple of things up for this one. No, the thing that I'm left with in terms of not actually having an answer here is something that came out in our conversation with Tina. And that was the fact that if we're not spending as much time trying to prepare young people for work inside the schools, what are we doing instead? Right. This is again, the concept of opportunity cost, right? That whatever you're doing, the cost of that is not only the cost of doing that thing, but it's also the cost that you pay in not doing anything else you could be doing. And we pay an opportunity cost in our schools.

And I think all three of us found ourselves sort of surprisingly unable to immediately fill that void. And to me, that's actually really exciting, right? This idea that we could think collectively a little bit about what we actually want schools to be for. Because you know, as I've droned on and on about, on this show and in the real world I think that schools can be these really incredible places, right? That they can be a gift that we give to young people in this society. It's a space where you know, that we can essentially collectively make the future. And here suddenly is the possibility of a little bit of blank slate, right? Just a little bit of space on the blackboard where we could write that new future together.

**Berkshire** Well, speaking of opportunity costs, I want to give our listeners the opportunity to spend a little money and support the podcast.

**Schneider** Shameless, go, go, go on.

**Berkshire** Well, as our regular listeners know, we rely on your support through [patron.com](https://patron.com) to keep the podcast going and pay our excellent producer. And all you have to do is go to [patreon.com/have you heard podcast](https://patreon.com/haveyouheardpodcast), and you'll see a list of all the cool extras you can get just by sending a little bit of money our way each month. And we have a very exciting, special running right now that if you become a subscriber at the \$10 per month rate, we'll send you a signed copy of our new book, *A Wolf at the school house door*. And Jack is waiting eagerly to find out what the topic of our in the weeds segment is going to be. Aren't you Jack?

**Schneider** So eagerly Jennifer, I'm just, I'm on the edge of my seat right now. But before we talk about that, let me remind our listeners, regular listeners know this, that if they want to keep their coins in their pockets, that that's fine. There are other ways to support the show. My favorite is if you take your favorite episode or the latest episode and share it with somebody, a colleague, a friend, a family member, even somebody who you think it might outrage, you can go on and give us a review wherever you've downloaded the podcast. And we also just like to know what you thought of the latest episode.

**Berkshire** And now the moment we've all been waiting for the topic of this episodes in the weed segment, Jack, we are living through one of the weirdest moments that I can recall on the plus side. There really is the sense that this kind of free market fundamentalism that has held us in its grip for so long is finally easing, right? That you hear people in both political parties saying that we need to figure out some other way to, to run things. But when you get to education, this completely flies out the window and you have people making arguments like fund individual students, not systems. So we are going to discuss that.

**Schneider** That is actually something I am well prepared to discuss. So you can wipe that grin off your face and I'll join you in the weeds. And we can have a very informed conversation.

**Schneider** You heard it here first.

**Berkshire** Until next time, I'm Jennifer Berkshire.

**Schneider** And I'm Jack Schneider.

**Berkshire** This is, have you heard [inaudible].

