

Economic Despair, Sickness and Politics of the White Working Class

Deaths of Despair and the Future of Capitalism, by Anne Case and Angus Deaton
(Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020).

Review by Alan Singer

I am working on a long-term project trying to explain why America's bituminous coal miners, the most radical trade unionists from the 1920s to the 1940s, and their families are among the most conservative voters in the first two decades of the 21st century. My focus is on Central Pennsylvania, the former UMWA District 2, where miners challenged a coal company open shop drive after World War I demanding nationalization of the mines and went on strike against a government enforced wage freeze during World War II. The political reversal is stark. Over 70% of voters in former coal mining counties in Pennsylvania, Ohio, Kentucky, and West Virginia cast their ballots for Donald Trump in 2016 and 2020.

Work by economists Anne Case and Angus Deaton, published in *Deaths of Despair and the Future of Capitalism* (2020), helps to explain this phenomenon. Bituminous coal mining communities are now plagued by high unemployment, stagnant wages, the dissolution of multigenerational families, and waves of suicide, alcoholism and drug abuse creating what they describe as an epidemic of "deaths of despair" among displaced white male workers. Case and Deaton build on the pioneering work of sociologist William Julius Wilson, who in *The Truly Disadvantaged* (1987) and *When Work Disappears* (1996) attributed the increase in crime and drug abuse and the deterioration of families and neighborhood institutions in inner-city Black communities to the disappearance of well-paying and meaningful jobs. Case and Deaton document the impact of declines in economic growth rates in the United States since the 1960s and deepening income inequality on white working-class communities. Loss fed a sense of malaise among those who remained in blue-collar communities and fueled alienation from former allies, anger at what they considered to be betrayal, and a profound shift in political allegiances.

Deaton and Case are both Emeritus Economics Professors at Princeton University. Deaton received the 2015 Nobel Prize in Economics and in 2016 was named a British Knight Bachelor "for his services to research in economics and international affairs." Case is a recipient of the Kenneth J. Arrow Prize in Health Economics. In 2019, they were jointly listed among the "World's Top 50 Thinkers" for their work explaining higher mortality rates among certain demographic segments in the United States. Case and Deaton write well and this book has a

nice balance between the technical and the readable, which makes it accessible to non-specialists, and hopefully, to government policy makers.

As a historian, to me one of the most interesting aspects of the book was the way the authors integrated historical examples into the study to illustrate modern economic concerns. There is extended coverage of the history of heroin, derived from the opium poppy flower, a cash crop Great Britain developed as part of its 19th century colonial exploitation of the Indian sub-continent and marketed in China as opium. Both the marketing of opium in China and Oxycontin in the United States in the late 20th and early 21st century were justified as a free-market response to consumer demand. In both cases it was an artificially and irresponsibly created demand for an addictive product that was sold to vulnerable users to ensure its continuing purchase.

While Case and Deaton argue that they believe in capitalism and its potential for improving demographic conditions and economic options, Part IV, Chapters 13 through 16 of *Deaths of Despair* is highly critical of the current dominant global capitalist system. The authors note there are many areas where free-market competition has failed to deliver goods and services as promised, especially in health care, and they support government initiatives to redirect investment towards the public good. They describe the American health care system as a “uniquely American calamity that is undermining American lives” (9). The authors explore why, for inadequate health care, “Americans pay so much and get so little” (197). A big factor is the “health care lobby in Washington,” with almost 3,000 lobbyists, many of who were former Congressional representatives or staffers. The cost for lobbying was almost \$600 million in 2018 alone, but the return in influence and profit was enormous (209-210).

Their research focused on higher mortality rates and lower life expectancy for middle-aged white American males ages 45 to 54 who do not have college degrees; a demographic group whose life expectancy had increased during the bulk of the twentieth century, only to decline in the last decades. This demographic group makes up 38% of the U.S. working-age population. Significantly, other white age cohorts, white females, whites with higher education, and non-whites, have not experienced a similar reversal. The phenomenon is also not evident in other advanced economic societies.

In the United States a person born in 1900 could only expect to live until age 49. By 2000, average life expectancy at birth was 77 years old, slightly higher for women than men and higher for whites than Blacks. Case and Deaton estimate that if the mortality rate for non-college educated white males ages 45–54 from 1998 had continued, almost 100,000 premature deaths would not have occurred. Even more striking, if the extended life expectancy curve from 1979 to 1998 had been maintained, half a million deaths would have been avoided in

the period from 1999 to 2013 alone. As a point of comparison, that is approximately the same number of Americans who died from the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

Case and Deaton acknowledge that the situation may actually be even more dire than their numbers show. They decided not to include deaths from obesity related diabetes as a death of despair, although dietary behaviors that contribute to diabetic mortality are often the result of the type of despair that leads to alcohol and substance abuse. They also suspected that the suicide rate is probably higher than reported because of the cultural stigmatism placed on suicide. Drug addiction and despair both positively correlate with suicide rates.

While the primary focus of the book is on increasing mortality, Case and Deaton describe the underlying health of the nation, especially the focus group, as fundamentally unhealthy, and this was before the COVID-19 pandemic pressed medical reserves beyond their limits. In the first stages of the COVID-19 pandemic poorer African American and Latino communities in the United States were most at risk. However, during the fourth wave Omicron surge, the most vulnerable to infection were politically conservative working class white men who refused to get vaccinated, another group of deaths that at least some of which could potentially be considered deaths by despair.

Interestingly, Case and Deaton dismiss the idea that drug use in itself is the cause of the higher mortality and lower life expectancy of the group. They compare current drug abuse with drug abuse by American soldiers during the War in Vietnam, roughly 1965-1974. In Vietnam, almost a third of American soldiers experimented with heroin use and approximately 20% became addicted. The primary reason for the drug abuse by American soldiers was a combination of stress and boredom. In this case, stress and boredom were relieved when soldiers returned home, detoxification was successful, and relapses were rare. Unlike in today's epidemic, drug use itself did not lead to suicide or other deaths. Case and Deaton concluded that life conditions that led to drug use, not the use of drugs itself, should be considered the cause of deaths from the opioid epidemic.

The rise in deaths of despair correlates with the decline in well-paying union jobs and union membership and the shift in the United States from an industrial to a service economy. Union membership declined in the United States from about 20% of the workforce in 1983 to 14.5% in 1995 to under 11% today. During this period college graduates generally improved their earning potential while income for the cohort group declined (154), leading many middle-aged white non-college educated workers to conclude that the system had become a "racket for redistributing" wealth upward rather "than an engine of general prosperity" (147). These are the underlying life conditions responsible for drug abuse and deaths of despair, the election of Donald Trump, and rightwing extremism.

Case and Deaton remain optimistic that these trends can be reversed and capitalism, albeit a more systematically regulated capitalism, can deliver improved economic conditions across the board. I am not as optimistic. The Sacklers and Purdue Pharma have been discredited and billed for the opioid pandemic, but the system that empowered and enriched them remains in place and Big Pharma continues to be politically powerful. Case and Deaton acknowledge that an American medical model that encourages rapid treatment of patients without prolonged interaction with doctors and the availability of a drug that provided a quick fix for pain were behind the opioid epidemic. They also recognize that “Government and the law have become complicit” (126) to the “brazen subordination of human need to human profit” (130). What they don’t satisfactorily address is whether the Sacklers and Purdue Pharma are aberrations or the way that the political economy of capitalism works in the 21st century. I argue that this is capitalism. We see the same forces at work in corporate efforts to undermine programs to regulate the use of fossil fuels and develop alternative energy as the world rapidly approaches a climate catastrophe.

During the 1950s and 1960s the AFL-CIO was the largest interracial organization in the United States and the backbone of the Democratic Party. It is no accident that American corporations, with support from Republican legislators and judges, attacked the labor movement as they abandoned communities and mechanized production or simply replaced humans with robots. The loss in income and status amongst middle-aged white blue-collar workers has contributed to increased hostility towards Black Americans and immigrants and opposition to social programs they believe benefit these groups at their expense. Since the Reagan administration, “Reagan Democrats” have helped elect rightwing Republican representatives and supposed moderates like Senator Joe Manchin of West Virginia who obstruct legislation that would greatly benefit them and their communities.

Case and Deaton wrote this book before the COVID-19 pandemic, the January 6 insurrection, the rightwing war on Critical Race Theory, and the Trump effort to discredit the 2020 election. They hardly address the Trump phenomenon at all and do not mention climate change. This is a very important book. Case and Deaton need to write another.

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