

Saqer Sulaiman

Deaths of Despair and the Future of Capitalism

Anne Case – Angus Deaton

Deaths of Despair and the Future of Capitalism

Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 2020, 325 p.

The book deals with the increase in deaths as a result of ‘deaths of despair’. The title of the book is *Deaths of Despair and the Future of Capitalism*. The book was written by Anne Case and Angus Deaton. The book is generally well written and consists of three parts: Part I: Past as prologue; Part II: The anatomy of the battlefield; and Part III: What’s the economy got to do with it? The book explains the huge increase in deaths of despair and highlights the social and economic factors that make life more difficult for the working class. The authors use their expertise to present data in a scientific way based on analysis and data. According to them, ‘this is an epidemic that is not carried by a virus or a bacterium, nor is it caused by an external agent, such as poisoning of the air or the fallout from a nuclear accident, instead, people are doing this to themselves’ (p. 38). Obviously, the fastest-rising death rates were from three causes: suicide, drug overdose and alcoholic liver disease. These kinds of deaths are all self-inflicted, quickly with a gun, more slowly and less certainly with drug addiction and still more slowly through alcohol (p. 2). The authors note that drug overdoses constitute by far the largest share of deaths of despair; however, they do not provide a clear breakdown of how the three categories have changed over time.

It is interesting to note that the authors used the average individual age index to denote the increase in desperation-related deaths. The authors recently noted a decline in life expectancy in the United States, at a rate not seen in the United States since 1918. The book offers a disturbing depiction of the vanishing American dream and indicates that for the white working class, America is today a land of broken families and few opportunities. Furthermore, the authors believe that ‘much more important for despair is the decline of family, community, and religion. These declines may not have happened without the decline in wages and in the quality of jobs’ (p. 183). Capitalism is no longer working for those who used to thrive in America.

Ann and Deaton contend that by the year 2000, the life expectancy trend was beginning to decline for white Americans between the ages of 45 and 54 (p. 25). Life expectancy is no longer increasing as it used to be. The authors clearly link the decline

in life expectancy to educational attainment. The four-year college degree is increasingly dividing America, and the extraordinarily beneficial effects of the degree are a constant theme running through the book. 'Those with a four-year degree are mostly exempt; it is those without the degree who are at risk' (p. 3). The widening gap between those with and without a bachelor's degree is not only in death rate but also in the quality of life. It is noted that those without a degree experience increase in their pain levels, and have poor health, severe mental distress, and decreased ability to work and socialise (p. 79). On the other hand, college-educated Americans become wealthier and healthier; and they usually get better job opportunities. Consequently, the gap is also widening in earnings, family stability, and community. This disparity between educated and uneducated middle-aged white Americans adds to the feeling that something is making life worse, especially for white Americans who do not have college degrees. The authors link the crisis with the weakening of the work situation, the increasing influence of companies, and, above all, the greed of the health sector, which redistributes the wages of the working class into the pockets of the wealthy people. However, despite the fact that Case and Deaton focused more on the root causes of deaths of despair and attribute it to the economic misfortunes among the white middle-aged Americans, they have rather little to say about whether expanding mental-health treatment could reduce suicide rates.

The book emphasised the importance of data in arriving at valid conclusions about the numbers and percentages of deaths due to despair and socioeconomic disparities. According to them, the death figures indicate bleak economic data. The less-educated white Americans who are the group at risk constitute 38 per cent of the working-age population (p. 4), and their real wages began to decline many years ago. The book reveals what leaves no room for doubt, that income inequality leads to inequality in the standard of living that already existed in societies even before the coronavirus crisis. The effects of the epidemic are classified according to educational attainment, because people with higher educational levels are more likely to continue working and earning from home. On the other hand, the blue-collar workers who lack educational qualifications are either at risk of losing their jobs or at risk of contracting the virus.

Regarding the relationship between the epidemic (deaths of despair) and industry, the authors point out that there is a collapse in the steady and modestly paid industrial jobs that previously provided a resource for the middle class. Additionally, they indicate that there is a boom in e-commerce and the dominance of this type of business at the expense of traditional struggling companies. Furthermore, labour's share of GDP – which had long been believed to be firmly fixed – has also declined in recent years. In the event that the unemployment rate continues to increase in the coming years, the terms of the contract between labour and capital will be in favour of the latter, and this will lead to catastrophic results. The authors assert that there is destruction to the lives of blue-collar workers, and this in itself results in a loss of dignity, pride, and self-respect, accompanied by the loss of marital life, and it brings despair.

However, the authors claimed that the primary cause of the deaths of despair was not economic fluctuations, but rather the long-term loss of lifestyle among the white working class. They pointed out that there is no correlation between unemployment and desperation deaths. Obviously, deaths of despair are prevalent among those who have been left behind, whose lives have not worked out as they expected (p. 139). So, in order



to reduce future risks related to deaths of despair and create a better society, the authors proposed some remedies. Their argument is that in order to combat this plague, the U.S. needs to boost wages and reduce income inequality, bring back unions, fight crony capitalism and its greedy mechanisms, and deeply reform the health-care system. Moreover, 'changing nature of work for those with less education is a necessary matter' (p. 164). All this could achieve some justice in income and standard of living and thus reduce the number of deaths due to despair among middle-aged white Americans.

To sum up, the book considers one of the important works of literature that discusses the contemporary socioeconomic phenomena and their impacts on societies and individuals. It includes important information and a profound analysis of human behaviour, economic and social phenomena. The authors presented a clear picture of the role of disparity in wages, level of education, healthcare system dysfunction, and tax policies in influencing the percentage of the death of despair. Differences between individuals are an undeniable fact; however, government interventions are necessary to bridge the gap between the rich and the poor.

